

HENRY ABBOTT

THE CHIEF
ENGINEER

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It was a dark night in July – very dark. There was no moon and clouds hid the stars. We were sitting by the camp fire. Bige had just kicked the burning logs together so that a shower of sparks shot straight up toward the tree-tops, indicating that there was no wind, when he said, "If you want to make that picture of deer this is just the kind of a night to go for it. You must have it dark so you can get close enough to get a good photograph. Also, this is just the kind of weather when we are likely to find deer feeding near the mouth of the river."

So with camera and flash-light apparatus I climbed into the bow end of our light-weight cedar boat, while Bige with paddle sat in the stern. We aimed toward the mouth of the river about half of a mile from camp and across the pond. No land-marks were visible, so we steered by "dead reckoning." Bige was feathering his paddle, Indian fashion without lifting it out of the water, so we silently proceeded, making no ripple on the surface and yet, at first, rather swiftly.

A few minutes later, the bow of the boat struck some yielding obstacle. My first thought was that we had hit a mossy, overhanging bank on the opposite shore of the pond. In times of stress, thoughts follow each other in rapid succession. My second thought was that the opposite shore was not mossy and overhanging, but rocky; third, that we had not been out long enough to get across; and fourth that we must have hit some animal who was swimming. But things were happening now, more rapidly than thoughts, and very much quicker than the time required to tell about them; and this latter thought was confirmed long before it was completely formulated.

Instantly, after we struck, a violent commotion occurred under the bow of the boat, water splashed in my face, there was the sound of scratching, gnawing and splintering wood, then a paw appeared on the gunwale beside me, the boat rocked and I yelled to Bige, "He is climbing aboard!!" while I lifted the camera intending to brain this indistinct shape as soon as I could see its head. This was immediately followed by the release of the weight on the side of the boat, its rocking in the opposite direction, a resounding slap on the water which threw a shower of spray over my head, in my eyes and ears. Then silence.

"Must have hit a muskrat," said Bige.

"More like a collie dog or a young bear," said I. "He surely would have swamped the boat if you had not slapped the water with the paddle, and I would have smashed my camera over his head."

"I didn't slap anything with the paddle. I wouldn't spoil your fun that way. Your friend in the water made all the noise. Wonder what he was," said Bige.

"Well, it was no measly muskrat, I'll stake my reputation and experience on that," said I.

There ended our photographing operations for that occasion, since after such a racket no deer could be expected to show himself at the pond, so we turned back to camp. On the way we discussed the possible identity of the animal with whom we had just been in collision, and who had upset our plans for the evening.

Most wild animals swim; some for pleasure, others only when it cannot be avoided. In the darkness we failed to get a clear idea of the size or shape of this fellow, we could only judge by the jolt our boat got, and the commotion he made in the water. We canvassed the possibility of its being a coon, a fox, an otter, a porcupine, a marten, a lynx or a wolf; but there was something about the habits of each that would not fit the incident and we went to bed with the problem still unsolved.

After breakfast the following morning, we went down to the shore and examined our boat. The thin part of the prow above the water line had been bitten through and a splinter a half-inch thick and eight inches long had been torn out. The marks of very sharp clean cutting teeth plainly showed at the upper end of the break. Short brown hairs were sticking to the rough edges of the bow, and on the keel for a space of eighteen inches back of the bow.

"That fellow must have thought a tree fell on him," said Bige. The boat, we found did not leak, so we went fishing. Passing a small island about a mile up the pond, we noticed a young green poplar tree had fallen into the water. There had been no wind storm for months and we did not know of any other campers on the pond so we wondered who could have cut down that poplar, and why? We went ashore to investigate. The tree we found was about four inches in diameter at the butt and it had not been chopped, but had been gnawed off. The ground about the stump was strewn with chips and one branch had been gnawed off and carried away. The tooth marks on the stump were like those on the bow of our boat, and looked as if made by a curved chisel about a quarter inch wide. The chips were from two to four inches long and were clean cut on each end and split out as if they had come from a wood chopper's axe.

Bige said, "Gosh! that looks like the work of beaver, but there are no beaver in these woods, haven't been any here for sixty years."

A few minutes later we found the branch which had been cut from the fallen poplar floating on the water near shore opposite the island. The bark had been stripped from it down to the smallest twig and it appeared white and conspicuous when seen from a distance of fifty yards.

Proceeding on our way toward the fishing ground, we presently saw the head of some animal above the surface. It was swimming toward us and waves were spreading out fan wise in its wake, on the smooth surface of the pond. Instantly we became motionless and watched its approach. When within fifteen or twenty yards of our boat it stopped, eyeing us curiously, then swung to the right and again to the left, apparently for the purpose of viewing us from different angles. Its back appearing above the surface was covered with a reddish brown fur with long grey hairs showing at intervals. There was a large white spot on the top of his head (this we later learned was not a characteristic marking, a white spot being quite unusual on animals of this family, and it enabled us to recognize our first acquaintance from among the many members of his tribe whom we subsequently met.) Two large, projecting and curving cutting teeth on the upper and two on the lower jaw appeared when he opened his mouth. There were also eight molars on each jaw. His eyes were inconspicuous and his ears were small but he had a broad, flat tail, shaped somewhat like the blade of a paddle.

Having, apparently, decided that it would be unwise to cultivate a closer acquaintance with two men in a boat, our swimmer humped his back, lifted high his broad tail and with it struck the water a powerful slap, the noise of which reverberated from "Mud Pond Mountain to East Inlet Holler" and it threw a shower of water and spray eight or ten feet into the air, looking like some of the war pictures of exploding mines.

The animal disappeared under water but a long line of air bubbles coming to the surface marked his progress under water. These we followed about two hundred yards to where they ended at the opposite shore. A closer examination disclosed the entrance, about two feet under the surface, of a burrow which seemed to rise under the high bank.

"Well," said Bige, "that's the fellow who met up with our boat last night. He's a beaver all right, but where in tunket did he come from?"

The incidents here related occurred while we were camping at Cherry Pond, seventeen years ago. We had learned in many conversations with Mitchell Sabattis (an Indian who died at a very advanced age a few years ago, and who was the oldest inhabitant of this region), about the Indians trapping beaver here, and how they sold hundreds of skins to John Jacob Astor, who became rich dealing in furs which he purchased throughout the northern forests and in Canada.

Sabattis explained that it was the practice of the Indians to take only a few animals from each colony, when they would move their traps to another dam. Thus there were always enough beaver left for breeding and they increased rapidly. But the white trappers, when they came, caught every beaver and took every skin, big and little, with the result that in a few years' time, beaver had been exterminated from the Adirondack forests and none ever came in again.

A few days after our encounter with the animal as above related, we learned, while making inquiries, that during the previous season the Conservation Commission of the State had "planted" a family of six beavers on one of the streams emptying into Raquette Lake, and we concluded that the individual we met was an emigrant from that colony.

Upon studying the government map, we figured that if he followed a chain of lakes and ponds through the connecting streams, he must have traveled thirty-five miles. If he had come over the mountain and several foothills in a straight line, which seemed unlikely, he might have shortened his trip to about twenty miles.

We saw the white headed beaver many times during our visits to the pond that summer, sometimes on shore, or sitting on the trunk of a poplar or birch tree which he had felled near the water. His body was about thirty inches long, tail ten inches long and six inches wide, hind feet webbed, like those of a goose, fore feet resembled the hands of a child but with long, sharp toe nails. He might have weighed forty or fifty pounds. He was a slow and clumsy traveler on land but a very efficient citizen in the water. He could dive and remain under water from eight to ten minutes without apparent inconvenience. Swimming, he could tow a log twice his own weight and against the current when necessary.

Early in September, his wife arrived. Whether the "old man" went after her, whether he sent a wireless message or a telepathic command, or whether the date of her coming had been arranged between them before he left home, we never knew. It seems quite probable that she just naturally knew that it was high time for her husband to stop exploring and loafing and to get busy building a house and storing a supply of food for the winter, so she arrived.

She would have no difficulty in following his trail, which after the habit of his kind, he doubtless marked at more or less frequent intervals by scooping up from the bottom of the pond or stream a double handful of soft mud, which he would place on the shore, shape it up into a nice round mudpie and deposit in its center a few drops of "Castoreum." This material has a peculiar, pungent and individual odor easily recognized by members of a beaver family. The Indians also highly prized the castoreum of the beaver for its supposed medicinal properties.

Immediately on the arrival of the female beaver the two began work building a house. This was placed on a point of land between the mouth of the river and a shallow bay or slough. The base of the house was about a foot above the normal level of the pond. Straight sticks and crooked branches two to four inches in diameter and about five feet long were placed on the ground for a foundation and were arranged in a circle like the spokes of a wheel. On these were piled other sticks, brush, stones, sod and mud, which latter was used as cement or mortar to bind the other materials together. An open space was left in the center, which grew smaller in diameter as the walls were carried up and was finally arched over. The house when finished was fourteen feet in diameter at the base; it was cone shaped and six feet high. It had no door or entrance visible on the surface; but as the side walls were being carried up one of the beavers dug a round hole twelve inches in diameter, straight down from the center of the house about eighteen inches, when it was curved toward the river and opened out in the bottom. Then he dug a second entrance, close to the first one, but this curved toward the slough. The water there being shallow, a ditch or canal dug in the bottom carried the outer end of the burrow down about three feet below the surface and a hundred feet or more out to deep water. The mud procured in digging the entrance and exit was used in plastering the walls of the house. No mud was used on the ventilating flue, which was a space about a foot in diameter in the center of the cone. This was thoroughly protected from outside enemies by two feet in thickness of criss-crossed sticks, but air could freely pass through the interstices.

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