

Interviews

Life Along the Kokosing

6-28-1999

Interview with Paul Hothem

Brenda Young

Paul Hothem

Chris Grasso

Lori Liggett

Follow this and additional works at: https://digital.kenyon.edu/lak_interviews

Recommended Citation

Young, Brenda; Hothem, Paul; Grasso, Chris; and Liggett, Lori, "Interview with Paul Hothem" (1999).
Interviews. 14.
https://digital.kenyon.edu/lak_interviews/14

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Life Along the Kokosing at Digital Kenyon: Research, Scholarship, and Creative Exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Interviews by an authorized administrator of Digital Kenyon: Research, Scholarship, and Creative Exchange. For more information, please contact noltj@kenyon.edu.

Life Along the Kokosing

Accession number: LAK-BY-A003

Researcher's name: Brenda Young

Event: interview with Paul Hothem

Place: Knox County Extension Office, Mount Vernon, Ohio

Co-workers present: Chris Grasso, Lori Liggett

The following is a catalog of a tape-recorded interview with Paul Hothem at the Knox County Extension Office in Mount Vernon, Ohio, on June 28, 1999. The interview mainly consists of Hothem's experience as a trapper and his link to an annual coon supper held in the county.

– Paul Hothem (hereafter PH) is a resident of Mount Vernon. He was formerly the Knox County Extension agent for 4-H programs; he served for 28 years and retired in 1988. Five years ago, the county fair board hired him to act as Junior Fair coordinator.

– When PH was a youngster growing up on a farm, trapping was a regular fall activity, both as added income and to control animal population. PH's father taught him and his brothers how to trap muskrats. PH noted that at that time, in the 1940's and early 1950's, there were very few raccoons around. They were mainly seen in the woods.

– PH was 8 when he began trapping on his own. He said his father told him and his brothers that they could do the trapping. There were three streams on the family farm; the oldest brother took the largest stream, the second the middle-sized one and PH trapped in the smallest stream.

– PH is a stream trapper. He traps muskrat, which are always around water, and coon, which travel everywhere but spend 10 to 20 percent of their time near streams. He is strictly a water trapper; he used to trap fox, but setting traps on land require a great deal of kneeling and PH has trouble with that because of a high school football injury.

– When PH was a child, the only trap used was a leg hold trap – the type that are a subject of great controversy because of the damage it can do to the paw of an animal. Later, the “sure grip” or “stop loss” trap was developed; this causes almost instant death to an animal that crosses it. The best trap is a “Conibear,” which has two jaws that close out. PH said he has timed such traps and find that animals caught in it die within 12 to 15 seconds.

– PH noted Ohio law requires that the largest traps allowed to be set on land be four and a half to five inches in size, so that pets don't get caught in them.

– In addition to new styles of traps, PH noted the way traps are set has changed since he was a boy. Years ago, trappers did not think about altering or adjusting traps. Today, most trappers who know what they are doing will spend a dollar or two dollars to make sure leg hold traps don't damage an animal's paw. Traps can be set to drown an animal, he said.

– When trapping muskrat, PH uses Conibears outside of their dens or on "slides" – areas where the animals go from the stream to corn or soybean fields. Traps may also be set under clumps of roots or on bank overhangs – areas he calls "feed beds." When trapping coon, he finds out areas along streams where coons are active and sets leg hold traps rigged to drown. He also baits the traps by squirting fish oil on them. He noted it takes time to adjust the traps properly. He is very careful to adjust them so that foot damage does not occur. He pointed out animal rights activists always bring up the danger of leg hold traps – he said if they went out with trappers who knew what they were doing, there would be nothing to argue about.

[ELAPSED TIME: 10 MIN.]

– Coon season starts around Nov. 7 and PH finishes trapping just after the holidays. He said it depends a lot on the weather, because rain and flooding can slow down the process.

– Another form of catching coons and other animals PH sometimes uses is a snare, which was approved for use by the state three or four years ago. PH said he doesn't like to use snares, which act similarly to a choker chain worn by dogs. The snare catches the animal without harming it so it can be set free elsewhere.

– PH said he sets about two hundred traps when he is trapping muskrat and coons. He has all his traps checked by noon or 1 p.m. every day; he rises before sunrise to make sure he gets to all of them. He noted Ohio has a twenty-four hour check law, and he believes in keeping up with that regulation.

– PH sets traps on farms within eight to ten miles of Mount Vernon. He has caught some coons in barns. He noted it is bad for farmers who have coon infestations in their barns because of health concerns for livestock. PH said he knows of a farmer in Holmes County who lost an entire herd of Holstein cattle because they were sickened after eating hay with coon feces in it. He also noted that raccoons pass the eggs of a parasite that, if it gets on people's hands and they touch their faces, can cause brain damage or death. He was not certain what either disease was called.

– Most trappers take their pelts to buyers; some skin the animals in the field. Because he provides coons for the Danville Lions Club annual coon supper, PH must bring his coons in to skin them and then clean and freeze the meat. He said coons in this area average 12 pounds; if you trap eight or twelve in a day, you would skin them in the field. He said after the pelt has been

removed from the carcass it is combed, flushed, stretched and dried.

– PH averages 200 coons and 200 to 500 “rats” trapped every year.

– PH uses the pelts of all the animals he catches. The coon carcasses not used for the coon supper are either put on a compost pile or buried.

– PH provides 125 coons for the supper; another 125 are provided by a Danville hunter named Rodney Mickley.

– PH said when properly prepared, coon is delicious. He said the glands are removed and then the meat is parboiled with an onion or potato for about a half an hour. The onion or potato and broth is then thrown out, the coon is rolled in a seasoning and baked.

– There are five cuts of meat on a racoon; the preferred meat would be the hind legs. There is also good meat on the front legs and on the loin or saddle. The ribs aren’t used. Coon meat is very lean. PH noted in the fall, coons are fat, because they partially hibernate during the coldest part of winter. In the spring they have little fat on them.

– The coon supper organizers uses cookers to prepare the coon. PH has provided meat for the supper for the past 10 years and goes to eat and listen to the annual speakers.

– PH said the speakers are people such as Woody Hayes and Andy Geiger, the athletics director at The Ohio State University. Some speakers are humorous, others are inspirational. He recalled a speaker a few years ago who had lost his legs in either Vietnam or a farm accident.

[ELAPSED TIME: 20 MIN.]

– The coon supper is held in Danville on the first Monday in February. “If you’re around, you need to go.” He noted they also serve pork for those who aren’t thrilled about eating game. He estimated 500 to 800 people attend the supper.

– PH said he got involved with the coon supper because he’s always liked to help people out. He called Mickley and offered to help – Mickley said he was hoping he would have called 10 years before.

– People come to the supper from all over Ohio and out of state. PH said he doesn’t know of any other dinner like the coon supper, although there are some “feeds” involving muskrat around.

– PH noted that like coon, muskrat cooked properly is very tasty. He joked his wife would “kill” him if he suggested bringing muskrat into their kitchen. He said when he was 4-H agent and there was a bigger interest in hunting and fishing, he had a club for kids who liked to hunt and fish and took them to Camp Ohio every year. He said for evening snacks, they would try

different types of game – they had bear, moose, goat, groundhog, rabbit, muskrat, coon – and it was all great. He said it is all very good if you know how to prepare it – otherwise the odor will drive you out of the house. The glands must be removed because that is what causes a bad taste and the odor. Older animals are worse, he said. Older coon – their meat is a bright red to red-purple – coons over 16 pounds and young coons are not used for the coon supper, he said.

– PH said he tries to trap the coon supper animals in the first three or four weeks of the season, because it is very time consuming and tiring. He noted he is up at 4:30 or 5 a.m. every day and might not get back home until 10 p.m.

– PH keeps the coons in a freezer in his garage – he usually fills it up twice. When he needs room, he calls someone from Danville to pick up a batch of meat; they'll take it to Young's Locker for storage until the supper.

– PH said people who like to fish, hunt and trap attend the supper, as do members of Lions clubs from around the state who want to support the Danville group. He also noted, "There are some good ol' boys that just enjoy something a little bit off center." Women also attend – and they don't all eat the pork.

– The Lions Club uses the money raised at the supper for various projects, PH said.

– PH said a lot of people just don't understand why trapping is necessary. He pointed out coons have few predators – fox, coyote and owls may hunt a few, but the population is very high. There are two concerns – distemper and rabies. Because the population has risen so in the past 30 years, there is always a distemper problem, PH said. Coons with distemper go through a two-week phase before dying. It begins with the nocturnal animals being out and about in daylight, then proceeds to staggering and blindness. Another problem is rabies, which came into Ohio from the east about two years ago. PH said he knows of no reports of rabid coons in Knox County now, but believes it will happen in a couple more years. Because of distemper and rabies, trappers and fur buyers always wear surgical gloves, he said.

– Raccoons are also a nuisance because they love sweet corn.

[END OF SIDE A. INTERVIEW CONTINUES ON SIDE B.]

– PH said when sweet corn is within two or three days of picking, coons come through and decimate the crop. He noted they also love field corn and will eat tender ears right out of the field. They have also been known to get into corn cribs where corn is stored on the cob and eat the top layers of corn.

– Coons can also be a problem for people who keep chickens. PH said coons don't kill chickens to eat them but apparently just for the joy of the killing. He said farmers often blame minks for killing chickens, and that sometimes happens, but often coons are responsible.

Young-5

– [Chris asked PH how much pelts sell for today] PH said pelts go for about \$3 each; you could

get more by sending it to auction or Canada. He said there's no money in it and he does it really just to help people. He said when he could make money off of it, farmers let him trap on their land – they knew he would respect their land and livestock – and even though he can lose money now, he still traps to help the farmers out. He said he feels he owes it to them. It is also healthful, he said, noting walking upstream for miles and miles is “good exercise.”

– The best place to trap is on farms with corn fields along one or both sides of the stream. Streams that run through pasture land are poor trapping grounds because there is no food source to tempt the animals to the area.

– PH said he traps only in small streams, leaving the Kokosing River to other trappers. He said the river is too deep and trappers must use boats.

– [I closed the interview on the tape, but it was fortunately left running, as the conversation returned to trapping]

– PH noted he gets a lot of calls to catch animals that have gotten into fireplaces, chimneys and attics. He said even houses that are in good repair are at risk. A few years ago, he and his wife were awakened by a coon that had gotten into their house through a small vent. He said he helps out friends at no charge; if they had a service come in from Columbus to remove an animal, it might cost \$300 to \$500. He said coons are everywhere – they can be seen at night around Mount Vernon, sticking their heads out of storm sewer drains. He said he is often called to Gambier to trap groundhogs; even though he uses celery, carrots or apples to entice groundhogs, the smell of coon in the cages will bring the coons out in droves.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]