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Interview with Paul Hothem

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Paul Hothem

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Researchers Present: Molly Sharp

Event: Interview with Paul Hothem

Location: The Brown Family Environmental Center

Interview Transcript.

I had arranged to meet Paul Hothem (from now on referred to as PH) at the Rural Life Center, but when he didn't come I called the Environmental Center and sure enough he was there. When I arrived a few minutes later he was standing in the kitchen reading the postings on the refrigerator. We sat down at the folding kitchen table and started talking.

MS: So, I understand that you trap all the raccoons for the Danville 'coon supper?

PH: No, no, I trap some... I don't trap nearly as much as I used to. I guess they got about a hundred from me this year.

MS: How many total do they get for the supper?

PH: I think about two-hundred and forty. It's a lotta 'coon.

MS: So tell me a little bit about trapping.

PH: Well I got started when I was just a little kid, back when you was raised on a farm. Back in the forties and the fifties, why trapping was a farm chore just like feeding the hogs or milking the cows. Everybody did it. Dad taught us, and it started out that he did the creeks and we boys would do the land trapping. Didn't know what we was doin', but we did it anyway. We checked the traps early-day. We had three creeks on the farm. What we called "The Big Creek" was probably about as wide as this room and a couple of smaller ones. I guess I must have been about eight when he gave the biggest creeks to the oldest brother and then he told the other two of us that we could choose our creeks. So we did. I guess I was eight years old when I got started with water trapping.

MS: What's the different between water trapping and land trapping?

PH: Well water trapping your trapping for muskrats, and mink, and 'coon. When you trap on land you're trapping fox, coyotes now, 'coon, and you can get the mink on land too. It's just totally different. Water trapping you really don't have to be that concerned about concealing the trap. I try to make almost all my sets as to where they're almost instant drowning. You put a stick on the bank and a stick out in the water where it's deep with a slide. He goes out, and in an extremely short time he's gone so there's no suffering or anything like that. With the land trapping—according to the law you can't use a surface bait and the trap has to be covered. So with you're land trapping you'd use a dirt-hole set and...

MS: What is that?

PH: Well, you have a trap bed and depending on the size of the trap it could be anything from about like that [5inches or so] to about like that [9inches], and maybe about an inch and a half deep. It's just you put a pan or a saucer on the ground and then you drew a line and then you shaved off about an inch and a half of dirt. Then you would make a hole about two inches wide and eight inches deep and you'd slant that away from the trap bed. Then you put your bait and your lure in that hole. You put in a little wad of grass (the grass ought to be dead) to what looks like a mouse nest. You push that down in so the critter can't see the bait but he can smell it, and then you put your trap in that bed. Then the trap has to be bedded, which means it has to be covered, and it can't tip—it has to be solid. If it tips they'll step on that and the whole thing will shake and they'll know it's not right. Then you cover it up, and the surface—or the area under the trap pan—has to be open so the trap can fire. It's just completely two different kinds of sets.

MS: And the 'coons are land trapping?

PH: The 'coons are both. If you took a hundred 'coon and had them all around Gambier—I don't have any stats to prove this—but probably of those hundred 'coon there wouldn't be any more than say about thirty percent that would spend any time at all in the Kokosing down here or any of these little streams that go in. A 'coon is a land animal that enjoys the water because some of their food source is crawfish in particular. It'd be too hard for them to catch a minnow or anything like that, but if they caught one they'd certainly eat it.

MS: So the traps don't kill the animal right away—accept for the water traps?

PH: Well there's two kinds of traps. There's what you call a connibear or the body-grippers, and those are instant kill. Here in the state of Ohio the law is that those can only be used in water, other than a small trap which is about four and a half inches square (those can be used on land). If you use that trap on land it's only a mink trap because—well a 'coon can get through it if you elevate it and so forth—those are instant kills. Other states allow the 160, or the 220, or the 300. They'd allow the 160 which is about that square, or the 220 which is about that square, on land. Ohio used to, but there is always the chance that you get a cat in or maybe occasionally a dog so they've said that you can't use those on land because they do kill instantly.

Now Ohio does allow snaring now. They've allowed snaring for about five years. I don't snare much, I just don't like to. A lot of people do, though. Now that is a cable, a very narrow cable (round with a bunch of little wire strands), and then it has a stop to it on the end. Now it has a lock, but it's the kind that once it tightens down it releases if the animal stops pulling. It's just like you put a rope around an animal to hold him. I don't snare much, but it is a very effective way to trap. It's one that a lot of people do because you can take twenty-five to fifty snares and put them over your arm and head out. You can set a lot of snares and they're easy to carry. Whereas if you had traps and you're carrying ten to fifteen or twenty traps it gets pretty heavy after a while.

MS: So what kind of traps do you use mostly?

PH: I use the coil-spring 1.5. They're about that big around. There are those who say it's cruel and causes all kinds of problems on the foot and it might if you didn't know what you were doing. But if you know what you're doing a traps like anything else, you tune them up, and you fine tune a trap. If you know what you're doing the traps going to catch right here (grabs the knuckles of his clenched fist) instead of up here (grabs his wrist). In an animal this is not bone, it's gristle and there's no damage. You get a 'coon on land and if you get out to go look at them early in the morning he's curled up sound asleep. Obviously he's not being bothered by anything.

MS: So if it's asleep when you get there, do you shoot them afterwards?

PH: Yeah, I shoot them with a .22. One shot and they're dispatched. Like I said most of my sets on water I rig and drown. On those kind of sets a live animal would not be in the trap for more than five minutes. Again, you have to know what you're doing. When I was a kid and up until maybe fifteen or twenty years ago, everybody trapped including a bunch of kids who quite frankly didn't know what they were doing. But hardly any kids trap anymore.

MS: Why is that?

PH: Well the prices went down. The prices were low, it's a lot of work, you ought to check your traps in the morning (I go out at dawn). I usually have mine run by ten or ten thirty. If a kid anymore is going to trap...you know what time the schoolbuses start out, these kids are up at six to be on the schoolbus at seven so they just can't check their traps in the morning. That's one reason. Traps are expensive, that's another reason. The prices were low, that's a reason. When the prices were high—ninety-five percent of the people who trap are really nice people, but like any group of people you have some crooks in the outfit. They steel your fur, steel your traps. If a kid goes out and spends sixty, seventy, eighty dollars for a dozen traps and he has them all stolen the first morning he gets discouraged pretty quick.

MS: Do you clean the animals once you catch them?

PH: Yeah, up at the 'coon supper absolutely. I check the traps often before I go home, and maybe I'll pull some and set some more. Then I'll go home and usually have a bowl of soup and then go out and take care of them right away. Skin them, and clean them, and get the 'coon in the freezer right away. Matter of fact most of them are skinned quick enough that I can't even put them in the freezer right way. If you put warm meat in a bag and you throw it in the freezer it cools from the outside in, and that inner part is warm. It sours and spoils. So I have to wait until they're cooled down before I can put them in the freezer.

MS: So, I'm from New Hampshire and we have raccoons at home, but I've seen them get very big. How much meat do you get out of a raccoon.

PH: I really don't know. I don't know what size they would be out there. In Ohio a really big coon is twenty pounds. Usually people talk about their twenty-fives and thirties, most of the people who get those kinds of coon are the people who like to stretch their story a little bit. Twenty, twenty-two, twenty-three pound coon is a big coon in Ohio. Now for the coon supper, those don't go over there. We don't save a coon that much over sixteen or seventeen pounds because the meat is real dark red, the bones are hard, and they tend to be a little bit tough. So most of the ones we save for Danville would be of the eight, nine, ten pound coon up to about fourteen, fifteen, sixteen. There the good eaters.

Now when you go north—just as part of Kenyon you're probably interested in wildlife and probably know this, but when you go north with most of your critters the further north you go the bigger they get. They have to have a body mass to tolerate the cold. You get up into Wisconsin, and Minnesota, and the upper part of Michigan and even into Canada, a thirty pound coons are not uncommon up there. But they're not common here. Also as you go south of here into Tennessee, Kentucky, the Carolinas, and as forth, the coon gets smaller.

MS: So, I've never heard of people eating racoons before. Is this a tradition unique to Ohio, or how did this supper get started?

PH: Oh, you'd be surprised the number of people that...well, ok, let's talk about 2001. 2001 you're probably right. There are probably not a lot of people that eat raccoon, but when you go back into the forties and fifties when I was a kid a lot of people ate wild animals. It was the coon, groundhogs, rabbits, squirrels, it was extremely common back then. It's not that common now. Wild animals fixed right are just absolutely delicious.

MS: Better than anything you can get at the grocery store?

PH: Well, here's an example. This isn't wild, but you know what a rabbit is. If you eat the cottontail and he's properly cooked he's good. If you get the tame rabbits, pen raised rabbits, and you prepare them like chicken, they're twice as good as chicken. They're just absolutely delicious. I told your friend there that I was as extension agent for about thirty years in charge of the 4H program. Being as outdoorsman, I was of course on the Camp Ohio board, and president of the board a good many years. We went down there and had a special camp for kids that liked to hunt, fish, and trap. We'd have experts come in to show them how and so forth. But the meals that we would prepare at camp for most of the meals the meat was wild animals. Fish, deer, and in the evenings at camp why you have to have a snack for the kids. It's usually a piece of cake or a cookie and so forth, but we would do is we would get all kinds of wild animals—beaver, coon, muskrat, groundhog, pigeon—anything we could get and that was prepared for the snack. It was prepared properly because we made sure that we had a guy in that could do it, and the kids would prefer over the cookies and the cake and all that kind of stuff.

MS: That's pretty high praise!

PH: You asked a question just about do folks eat wild animals. I don't recall the year, but it would have been....let's see I retired at the end of '88....in the mid '70s we had an economist in extension that like me we interested in this. The economy was in the dumpers for a couple three years, and I was talking to her one day and I asked her if I thought if we had a program on preparing wild animals for the table would we

get anybody? Well we thought we would. The room held 80 and we decided that possibly rather than just opening it up to the public we should have them call in so we didn't have more than we could handle. We were absolutely shocked and astonished, we had to have two meetings because we had enough people sign up for two sessions at 80 per session. You'd be surprised the number of people that wanted to know how do I have to clean my muskrats, how can get them in the freezer, and the same thing for groundhogs, coons, the whole bit. So back then anyway, that's not too long ago, they definitely were interested in feeding their families and using wild animals to do it.

MS: So do you have a favorite animal or a favorite recipe?

PH: Well I have a wife, and if she knows I'm cooking it she'd almost kick me out of the house. So occasionally when I would trap and catch a cottontail I would always clean it, and I'd do the preparing. She would usually have a piece or two and like it, so the rabbit we occasionally have. But you asked me what my favorite was, if properly done the best of all wild animals is muskrat. It's probably the cleanest of all wild animals. They're a rodent, live in the water (almost exclusively in the water).

MS: How do you prepare those?

PH: Well, you would of course have to skin them right away. Remove the glands, they have glands under their legs. You soak them overnight in salt water.

MS: What does that do?

PH: It pulls the blood and the wild taste out. Then you would par boil it for maybe fifteen or twenty minutes, you'd put a potato or two in there and an onion. But you wouldn't eat the potato or onion, you'd throw it away. Then you would drain, then you would already have determined how you were going to season it. Most people would use flour, salt, and pepper, and any spices they would want. You roll that good and you put it in your big cooker and you kinda stack it all on one side and it kinda holds the moisture in. Maybe put a teaspoon or tablespoon or two of water in the bottom to keep the moisture. You just kinda slow cook that for I don't know how long. You just have to go by the texture, but it's good!

MS: I've never eaten—well, I take that back. I've had buffalo and elk, but that's about it.

PH: I guess we had those at those camps that I was taking about, along with bear and everything else. You just have to know how to cook 'em.

MS: What else do you trap?

PH: I strictly go in the water. Coon, muskrats, mink, and beaver.

MS: What are the seasons on trapping?

PH: Seasons for muskrats and mink usually comes in November the 10th, and coon season (I'm talking about the water trapping now.) would come in the 15th, and the beaver for Knox. County would be December the 24th, 25th, 26th. Then the coon season is out now, coon season went out the last day of January. Muskrat and beaver stay in until the end of this month. There are pockets around the state in the areas where they have a lot of marsh, maybe up around Erie Co. In there where they have a spring muskrat season I think it runs through March.

MS: Are there limits to how many traps you can set?

PH: No. Ohio has a twenty four hour check rule. Which means you have to check the trap at least every twenty four hours. I do it in the morning, every twenty four hours. You have to understand that all these animals are nocturnal, and you know what that is. It means that they go out at night and they do their feeding and their roaming at night. That's not saying that they don't occasionally go out in the daytime. I spend a lot of time now indoors, and you see a few muskrats, and beaver, and mink out in the daytime but

it's not common. If you would check your traps every morning and every night, or every evening you would probably have a few muskrats in your traps in the evening.

Back when I was a kid and too dumb to know any better, why the first couple three days of the season why we'd check the traps about midnight and we'd check them again in the morning. You'd have a good catch both times.

MS: So, do you trap only on your own land?

PH: I don't have any land now.

MS: So where do you trap?

PH: Well, you see I was an extension agent and I think you know what an extension agent is. Extension agents are well known because you get out amongst all the farmers and I was well known by the farmers. They knew that I liked to trap and I made it clear to them that when I started to trap I didn't want to take any trapping from anybody that was trapping their land, but if that person ever quit then call me. So that's how I got all my territory, just get a call that this guy's not trapping this year so you just come down and help yourself.

MS: So you have pretty much the run of the County?

PH: Oh no. I suppose I've got farms that I think are good farms...maybe twenty (there's a few more than that). I don't trap nearly as much as I used to. When you get older you slow down a little bit.

MS: I would imagine that you place your traps by the habitat that that animal lives in.

PH: Well it has to be sign. Sign is tracks. Tracks are—with the muskrats—their den or a slide, and that is simply where they go in and out of the water. It's a path. Then occasionally there will be a patch of grass and it's a feed bed up under hanging banks or under roots and places like that. Coon its just where you see the tracks. Then you use lure. I use fish oil. They have a good nose, and their favorite food is fish-type foods. They'll come right in. Then of course I've told you about the drowning, so I can't make every set where the most sign is. If you want to down you've got to have two feet of water. So I might have to move my traps a few yards to get away from the hot spot or the spot where most of the tracks are, but then the fish oil calls him over. Then you've got to know exactly where to put your trap in conjunction with the bank and use sticks to have him step right on the pan. It's not hard at all.

It's a dying art, and I really don't know how many there's going to be a couple years. I teach the class in the county. Harold Bower and I are the instructors for the trapping class. Kids have to go through the hunter safety and they have to go through the trapping class before they're allowed to buy a license. I suppose the last ten years I doubt if we've averaged more than five kids a year. That tells you it's dying out. In the older days, gosh twenty, thirty, forty. I used to have a 4H club that was for kids that liked to hunt and trap. We had ten meetings, about one every week. The room that held 80, we'd get full, but it'd be families. Mom, dad, all the kids would come year after year, after year. I know four or five years ago when the prices really got low I talked to the game warden and I think he said they didn't sell more than eight or nine trapping permits in Knox County. So I don't know what will happen in a few years. I won't be around to see it, the day you can't trap, but that day is probably also coming. You have your animal rights groups as you well know are quite opposed to it. I think if you could talk to them the way we're talking here tonight, I think you might be able to convince a good many of them that maybe trapping isn't what they think it is, that that is a misconception.

MS: Do you hunt to, or are you only a trapper?

PH: I used to. I used to hunt a lot when I was a kid. I would like to hunt now, I really like to hunt but I don't have time for both.

MS: You like trapping more than hunting?

PH: Yeah, I think so. See I still work half a day and then volunteer for a lot of things. Up until the last six years I've been the manager of the Junior Fair. I dropped that this year, but I've had enough to do that you've gotta have a little bit of time for the family you know and so forth. Can't do both, but within a couple years I'd like to start hunting again. I've never shot a wild turkey so I'd like to do that and that's going to take some time to learn. I love to fish, and I go to Canada every year to fish but I don't take time to fish down here and I've gotta start doing some of that.

MS: Why trapping? Why do you like trapping better than hunting?

PH: Well when you hunt you've got a rifle and the critter really doesn't have a whole lot of a chance if you're close to him. In trapping, believe me there are animals that you can't trap because those animals are intelligent. There are animals who've had their toes caught before and they know exactly what it is. I trap for a whole lot of reasons. Being from agriculture I understand that there absolutely has to be a way of controlling population of wild animals. One prime example is there year—you know what distemper is? Well coon get distemper, and you talk to any trapper this year or anybody hunting and they will tell you that the coon population was way way down. It was way, way down because of distemper. Like I said there are those that say that trapping is cruel. I guess I would ask you this. If you had to die would you rather be caught in a trap for five minutes to a couple of hours, or would you prefer to have distemper where you are a nocturnal animal. Distemper gets to the brain to where you run around in the daytime. Then it grows to a point to where it effects the eyes and they go blind, and they walk around for two, three, four, or more days walking into trees. I've seen them wak into buildings. Now if I had to die I'd take the trapping rather than go through disease. It's the same thing with mange. If you ever watched a fox die of mange, it takes days, it takes weeks, and they go through the same thing. It effects the eyes and they go blind. So one reason is that I know that you have to have a control.

Another one is that I know that farming is rough. The farmer puts in all kinds of hours, all kinds of money, all kinds of investment, and you've got to go along the streams sometimes—a soybean field or a corn field, or along the edges. Farmers don't mind sharing with wildlife, but they do mind having the crop destroyed by wildlife. If you go into a bottom or bottomland where you have corn along a creek and you have a colony of beavers. You're talking about destruction of acres and that is with an "S" not acre, it's with an "S". They just come up, cut off the stalk, pull it into the water. They use it in their dams, and of course they eat some of it. So crop destruction to farmers is a very major thing. I understand that, and when the prices got extremely low--and there for a few years you were talking a dollar to a dollar and a half for a coon—where it didn't even pay for you gas, I never slowed down because the farmers allowed me to trap when prices where good, and I owed it to them to help to help them out when the prices were low.

The other thing is that I like to get out and just walk, and stay fit. To me it's a challenge. I don't know what the word is when you talk about when a person comes back in a new life—

MS: Reincarnation?

PH: Yeah, reincarnation. Well I suspect that I was probably something like Daniel Boon or one of those guys a long time ago. I guess it's just in my blood. I enjoy it.

MS: Do you usually go out by yourself?

PH: Yes. I had a couple sons and they're gone now. They used to go a lot when they could, and I had a real good friend down at Columbus. When I was in Coshocton County as a youth he was my 4H agent for several years and he was an avid outdoorsman. When he retired he used to come to go with me a good bit. He would occasionally give a call, do you mind if I go with you for a day? I almost always go by myself, but I'm at the age now where I probably won't go any more than one to two years unless I can get a partner. I have friend who is retiring and I hope he will become a partner. If you have a partner it just cuts down greatly on the work, and if anything were to happen to you why there'd be somebody there—otherwise they'd find you floating in the creek a couple of days later.

MS: You taught your sons how to trap?

PH: We live in town and they were very active in high school in sports and those kinds of things. Like I said they liked to go with me. I taught them how, I helped them set a few traps, but they both live in town now. One of them lives in Washington DC and the other one lives in Charleston, South Carolina so they're not going to be trappers.

MS: Do you think that's part of the problem where so many people aren't trapping anymore?

PH: Yeah. I gave you a good many reasons, but yeah. One of the main reasons is that farm population has dwindled. I can't give you the exact stats but suppose the average age of a farmer anymore would be in the upper fifties if not sixties, so the kids are gone. There used to be a lot of farmland but, again I don't have the stats, but pretty close to half the farmland in Knox County is absentee ownership. As far as farmkids there just aren't very many of them anymore. The ones in town could trap if they want to, it's just that most of them don't.

MS: Well that about answers all my questions. That was very helpful, and that you very much!