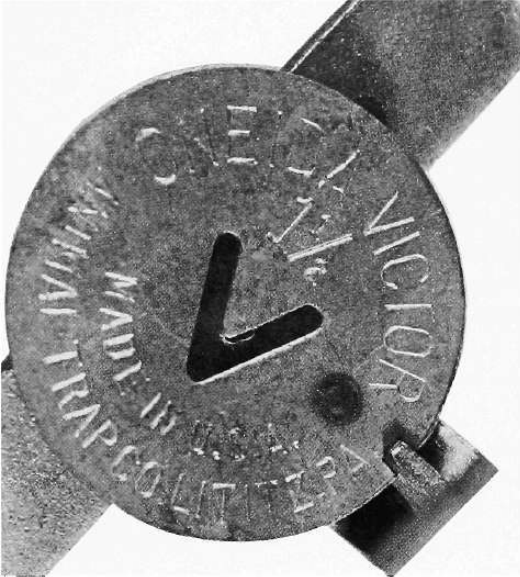


SOCIETY COLLECTS ANIMAL TRAPS



THE IMPACT of the fur trade on the state's history is reflected throughout the Minnesota Historical Society in many ways — from solitary, scholarly research to underwater diving for archaeologically significant artifacts. Some of the collections in the society's museum division, too, help shed light on the fur-trade industry. One often neglected aspect is the development of the traps used to catch fur-bearing animals. Thus, museum personnel last spring took stock of their trap collection and found it inadequate.

In June, Robert C. Wheeler, associate director of the society, and John Yust, museum curator, began a concerted effort to locate and acquire traps, preferably old, handmade ones. A news release calling for traps was sent to newspapers all over the state. It described the characteristics of hand-forged traps and gave a brief history of trapping in North America.

Numerous papers printed the release, and several persons responded. One of them was John Elsing, who lives in rural Rushmore in Nobles County in southwestern Minnesota. Mr. Elsing had just what the society sought — more than fifty traps gathered during forty years as a trapper. Many were old, several were handmade, and some carried a famous, early brand name (Newhouse). Mr. Elsing, a retired farmer who still traps a little, allowed the society to acquire almost all of his traps. And, further, he offered to try to help add to the completeness of the society's collection. He soon made good on that offer by putting Mr. Wheeler in touch with Alan K. Joens, a friend and fellow farmer who lives in Wilmont about five miles from Mr. Elsing. Mr. Joens had a handmade cougar trap that had been in his family for generations. With understandable reluctance, he finally agreed to part with



JOHN ELSING, a retired farmer who lives in southwestern Minnesota, sold about fifty of his traps to the society. They include old, rare, and handmade items.

ALAN K. JOENS (right) and John Yust hold up a cougar trap which Mr. Joens sold to the society.



the trap. More recently, a St. Paul man — Norman R. Nelson — sold the society ten traps that carried brand names such as Norton, Diamond, and Kompact, thereby helping fill in gaps in the collection. As of this writing, the society has added in all some seventy traps to its original collection of ten.

THE METAL TRAP came into common usage relatively recently. Both Indian and white trappers used cruder methods to obtain pelts and animals. According to explorers' journals, trappers would chisel through ice on beaver runs, set nets, and then open the beaver houses. Snares and deadfalls (traps constructed so that a gate, log, or other weight would fall on the animal) accounted for a large percentage of the pelts taken. Even after metal traps came into common usage, many trappers preferred the older methods because steel traps were heavy and awkward to carry about.

Early metal traps, until about the mid-1800s, were all handmade by blacksmiths. And it was on a blacksmith's forge in 1823 in the village of Oneida Castle, near the Oneida Indian Reservation in central New York, that the trap industry was born. Sewell Newhouse's father was a blacksmith, but the son used the shop and its equipment to turn out guns and traps for his own use. Newhouse used old ax blades, files, and worn-out scythes to fashion his springs. He used smithy scrap to form the bottoms and crosspieces. Though crude in appearance compared with today's machine-made traps, they were not only effective and reliable but the basic designs were so practical that they strongly resemble those turned out on modern assembly lines. Newhouse's traps became the envy of his Indian and white neighbors. Soon he was making and selling hundreds of traps of different designs and sizes. He was often so busy he had two assistants.

Sometime before 1848, Newhouse joined the Oneida Community (a communistic society of "Perfectionists") at a time when that group needed industrial development. A small shop was erected for trap construction, and men, women, and even children helped out. The combination of expert and willing help under the supervision of Newhouse resulted in the production of what were then the best traps available. Ingenious machines were invented to produce the traps, and within a decade after Newhouse's arrival most traps were machine-made and production was enormous. "The best grade of traps made by the Oneida Community retained the trade name 'Newhouse,'" writes noted authority Carl P. Russell. "For more than a hundred years the name has stood for

the best in steel traps — something of an institutional monument to one country blacksmith."¹

In 1864 a factory was built in Sherrill, New York. Ten years later the shop brought out the Hawley and Norton line of traps, and in 1886 it first manufactured the Victor traps — probably the most popular line of traps ever made. Both the Newhouse and Victor lines are still being made by the Animal Trap Company of America whose main offices are in Lititz, Pennsylvania. Although its name has been changed and mergers and growth have altered it, the company has been in continuous operation since 1848 when the

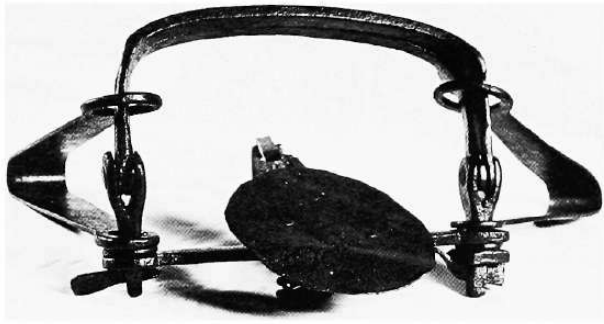


AN EARLY NEWHOUSE trap, which probably dates back to the 1840s, is remarkably similar in design to modern traps. Note the hand-forged details on the jaw and spring in the inset photograph.

Oneida Community, Ltd., first began it. Oneida sold out its trapping enterprises in the 1920s when its flatware and silver businesses were prospering.

THE MINNESOTA Historical Society's representative collection of about eighty traps now shows several phases of the development of traps through the years. Three of the society's traps are especially rare. One is an early, hand-forged beaver trap with "S. Newhouse/Oneida Community" stamped onto a spring.

¹ Carl P. Russell, *Firearms, Traps & Tools of the Mountain Men*, 163 (New York, 1967).



A RARITY in the society's collection is this cougar trap brought to Minnesota from the East in the mid-nineteenth century.



SEVERAL TEETH, fastened with leather or a similar material, were added to this beaver trap so that it could be used to catch otters.

Acquired from Mr. Elsing, it probably dates back to the 1840s when Newhouse was just beginning to turn his talents to the benefit of the Oneida Community. In addition to its clearly hand-forged marks, the trap has square nuts at the bottom of the jaw posts—a feature which was eliminated when parts began to be stamped out and constructed on an assembly-line basis.

Another valuable trap is that acquired from Mr. Joens. This cougar trap may date back to the 1830s. It is interesting not only because it is old and hand-made but because it carries with it a family history. An aunt of Mr. Joens's said the trap was made by a blacksmith in Jamestown, Virginia. His great-grandfather, Allen Smith, took it to Linden, Indiana, in 1840 and subsequently to Nashua, Iowa, in 1851. Joens's grand-

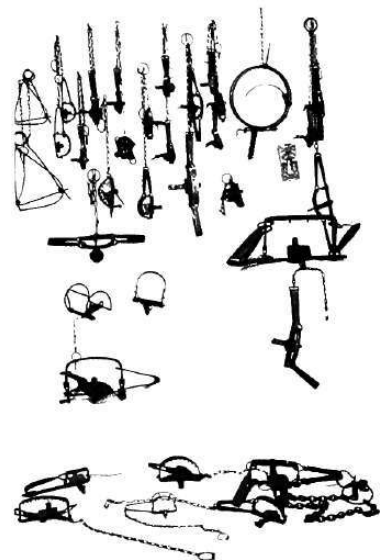
father, John Wesley Smith, took the trap with him to Nobles County in 1900, and Mr. Joens acquired it in 1961.

Another unusual beaver trap was part of the collection before the most recent acquisitions. The trap was found at Sand Point Lake along Minnesota's northern boundary and donated to the society in 1924. It was constructed between 1830 and 1850. It is clearly hand-forged and has the characteristic unmarked pan—in this case square, although it was often round or oval. The jaw posts are riveted to the base rather than secured by nuts, which would indicate it is a very early device. Various parts appear to have been added to the trap at different times in its history. Teeth, fastened with leather or some similar material, were added after its initial construction and indicate it was probably also used to catch otters. The chain, swivel, and ring are all relatively recent additions.

THE SOCIETY'S search for and acquisition of traps continues. The goal is not a large quantity of traps but a definitive collection which will illustrate the development of the trap as it evolved from pre-steel snares, to cruder and somewhat unreliable early metal traps, when each bore the distinctive marks of the maker, to and including the modern, standardized, assembly-line product. It will be a collection which sheds insight into one facet of Minnesota's earliest industry—the fur trade.

PHOTOGRAPHS by Eugene D. Becker and Joseph Jabas. The "V" for Victor on the pan of the trap in the upper left corner on page 146 is a familiar symbol to anyone who has ever trapped. The Victor is probably the most popular line of traps ever made.

FUR-BEARING animals ranging from bears to mice were caught in these traps when they were in use. Some of the variety of designs and makes can be seen by the representative examples shown here.





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