



Fifth generation trapper, Renee Knowlton of Charles City, holds a mink. With her father, Steve, they frequent the habitat-rich Cedar River in search of game. Her grandfather, Mike, set his first trap line in 1945, and reluctantly hung up his traps at the end of 2004. Now 69, he relives the tales gathered during more than a half-century in the outdoors. "I got paid, but back then a person didn't always get paid cash. Sometimes you were paid with an article of clothing or maybe a chicken or two," says Mike.



Steve Knowlton, Renee's father, as a child in the 1960s; RIGHT: Renee's grandfather, Mike



Trapping the Vigor of Youth

A heritage of trapping success is handed down five generations in this Charles City family.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY LOWELL WASHBURN

At first glance, Renee Knowlton appears to be your typical 14-year-old, high energy, continually-on-the-move all-American teenager. When not attending classes at Charles City Junior High School, Renee takes to the basketball court to play forward for the Comets. But as soon as practice concludes, she eagerly trades gym shoes for a set of heavy duty, rubber hip boots. For this outgoing teen, there's no time to waste. With darkness closing fast, it's time to hit the river and run the trapline.

Since when did typical teenage girls start running traps? With the traditional, male segment of Iowa furtakers plummeting during the past two decades, it seems hardly anyone spends time trapping these days. So what compels this young woman to brave icy streams, boot sucking mud, and bone numbing cold on the prospects of catching a furbearing mammal or two?

"By the time I was three years old, I was already going with my dad as he worked his trapline," she says. "When I was real little, I even rode in his pack basket while he checked traps along the Cedar River. When I was older, I got to carry all the mink. I loved that. They were my favorite animal to catch and still are."

Renee's father, Steve, remembers those seasons well. "From the very beginning, I told Renee that she didn't need to go along with me on the trapline," he recalls. "But she seemed to have a very strong interest in the out-of-doors and as long as she kept that interest, I was glad to have the company." The last few seasons, Renee uses her own traps. "Sometimes we make competition sets, and she wins about half the time. It's really been fun," he adds.

Renee agrees. "For bank sets, I dig my own holes and put in the bait. On some of the bigger traps, I still let Dad adjust the trigger. The only time I've accidentally caught myself was while I was practicing in the garage and caught a finger. Since then I've been careful of the larger traps."

Although the Knowltons take advantage of creeks, bridge crossings, tile outlets, and ponds, the large majority of their trapping activities still focus on the habitat-rich Cedar River corridor. Most of their traps [footholds or conibears] are placed underwater in hopes of catching mink, raccoon, muskrats, and beaver. Because of their abundance and value, raccoons are the current 'bread and butter' species of the family trapline.

"I like to catch them all, but mink are still my very

“By the time I was going with my Dad



Above: Renee digs a pocket set, designed to catch raccoon and mink. Renee's grandfather, Mike, started trapping by removing pocket gophers, a nuisance species for his neighbors before moving to larger species. Mike learned trapping basics from his dad, passing along generational experience from Renee's great, great grandfather who lived near Hayward, Wis. "He was married to a Chippewa and was a logger during the summer and a trapper during the winter. That's as far back as I can go with my family," says Mike.

favorite," says Renee. "I like to get out right after a fresh snow and find their little paw prints. I think mink are smarter than all the rest." Wary, experienced mink eat the bait and don't get caught. "I just love the feeling of coming over the bank and finding a huge mink in the set. I think — Oh yes — this time I got him instead of him getting me!"

The unusual sights also add to the adventure, such as seeing a muskrat swimming under glass-clear ice. "It was carrying a whole bunch of grass and stuff in its mouth and was headed back to its den. I'd never seen anything like that before, and it was definitely a sight to see," she laughs.

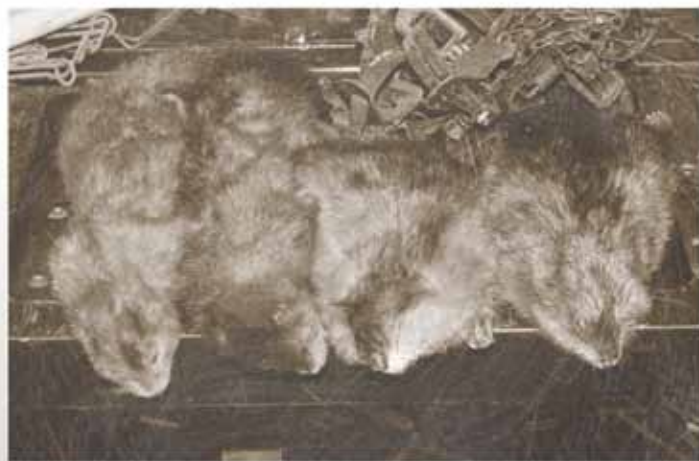
Catching a gray fox was a rarity too, but the coolest was trapping a jet-black raccoon, says Renee. "He was so dark that you could barely make out his face mask or the rings on his tail. That 'coon looked like someone had dipped him

in a bowl of dye and colored him. He was beautiful and was the highest priced raccoon we had that year."

Like most, the Knowltons are quick to acknowledge successful fur harvesting doesn't just happen. It requires patience, dedication, and long hours on the trapline — often in pitch darkness or extreme weather. The hard work doesn't end after harvesting a raccoon, mink, or muskrat. Raw furs need skinning, freezing and stretching to prepare for market. The work may continue deep into the night. Renee helps with pelt processing, even developing her own tricks.

"I like to help with the skinning too," says Renee. "I start them, but if it's too tough, Dad finishes. If the pelts are still wet, I take a hair dryer and comb to the furs. I dry them out and then comb out every bit of mud and remove every

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Above: Renee sets a Victor one and a half coil spring. Patience and long hours on the trap line in rough weather haven't stopped Renee, but "I don't get out [trapping] anymore," says Renee's grandfather, Mike. "But I'm very pleased to see my son and granddaughter trap together and enjoy the same things that I did. You don't see enough of that anymore. I think it's important, especially in this day and age," he says.

single burr or seed from the hair. When it's all done, the fur is absolutely perfect — It's just beautiful," she adds.

The pelts are sold locally. "We have a group of friends that have trapped around here since at least the mid-80s. We like going to a local fur buyer where we can lay everything out on the floor, let them see what we have, and then start haggling over price," says Steve.

"I think the price I get for my furs runs better than average," says Renee. "I really like the haggling and they [fur buyers] treat me pretty good. I tell them stories about some of the exciting things that have happened or the great catches. I remind them about how much work and expense we've gone to, and how good a condition our pelts are in. I think it all helps," she laughs. "When I get done talking to them, the prices usually go up." 🐾

Behind the Trapping Decline

Recruiting is the most important need of Iowa trappers, assesses the DNR's Ron Andrews. As a furbearer resource specialist for the past four decades, he's seen plenty of change in the way lowans use this natural resource.

Twenty years ago, trapping represented a flourishing Iowa industry. With pelt prices and interest running high, Iowa exceeded twenty thousand trappers most years. During the late 1980s, however, fur prices for raccoon, mink, and muskrats plummeted and trapper numbers declined. Iowa trappers today number a mere 7,000.

"I think the decline of trapping is a much more complex issue than just pelt prices," says Andrews. "Most furbearer populations are high and for some species, such as raccoons, the numbers have been extremely high during the past two decades. Lack of opportunity is certainly not a factor in the current decline of trapping."

Family heritage is one of the most important links to maintain fur harvesting, Andrews says. Modern demographics are taking people away from the resource. "Unless a parent is directly involved in trapping, then it's highly unlikely that their children will become involved."

Like waterfowl hunting, trapping involves family tradition and requires specialized equipment. Resource managers are currently seeing some future for trappers, as pelt values enjoy recent surges on the world market. An especially heavy demand for American pelts, such as raccoon and fox, comes from Far Eastern markets such as China.

1987 IOWA FUR HARVEST:

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|----------------------|---------------|
| Raccoon | 400,000 pelts |
| Muskrat | 600,000 pelts |
| Mink | 33,000 pelts |
| Red Fox | 24,000 pelts |
| Coyote | 13,000 pelts |
| Beaver | 18,000 pelts |

CURRENT IOWA FUR HARVEST:

| | |
|----------------------|-------------------|
| Raccoon | 125,000 - 150,000 |
| Muskrat | 60,000 - 70,000 |
| Mink | 15,000 - 20,000 |
| Red Fox | 12,000 |
| Coyote | 7,000 |
| Beaver | 3,000 |