

FUR & FORTUNE

Every winter, Manitoba's trappers head to the **Thompson Fur Table** to sell their wares at what's become the industry's biggest, fuzziest family reunion. MARGO PFEIFF trekked to Thompson to learn how to grade fur, how to trade it, and most importantly, how to celebrate it.

It's 5:30 a.m. in mid-December and a line-up is already snaking into the 29-below darkness outside St. Joseph's Ukrainian Catholic Church in Thompson, Manitoba. Dozens of trappers wreathed in cigarette smoke shuffle to keep warm, faintly lit by the headlights of idling pick-up trucks. When the doors finally open an hour later, they press inside, inching past a Manitoba Conservation officer who scrawls a number on the back of the trappers' hands in the order in which they arrived. Each trapper gets a form to record the number and species of furs in their lot. Then they drag their hockey bags, Tupperware bins and backpacks stuffed with pelts to a seat and wait amid the Christmas decorations in the brightly lit parish hall.

As the room fills, four fur buyers in clinical white coats – each toting briefcases and metal boxes heavy with cash – take up positions behind tables running the length of one wall. At exactly 8 a.m., 71-year-old Phillip Bighetty Sr., an elder from Brochet, Manitoba, steps up to the microphone and lowers his head. "Creator be kind to us. Bless all these trappers here." He continues in Cree, finishing by thanking everyone for continuing to live off the land and carrying on the tradition of trapping. Then Ron Spence of the Manitoba Trappers' Association takes the mike and calls out "Trapper number one!" Thus begins a two-day trapping rendezvous that transforms the church hall into a scene right out of Canadian history. It's the Thompson Fur Table, Canada's only remaining old-fashioned fur-trading auction. >>

■ Albert Saunders of York Landing, MB, proudly displays his marten haul.



THE FUR TABLE was founded back in 1979 in an effort by the Manitoba government and Indian and Northern Affairs Canada to rejuvenate the dying wild-pelt trade and increase profits for Northern trappers. Every year since, between 200 and 300 trappers – mostly aboriginals from small communities scattered through the Manitoba hinterlands – gather their late-fall and early-winter furs, pile them into pickups and travel hundreds of kilometres over ice-covered roads to Thompson, a

hub of 13,000 people more than 700 kilometres north of Winnipeg. There, up to five local and southern fur dealers compete for the lots. “The Fur Table allows trappers to sell locally without having to head to Winnipeg or Toronto,” says Cherry White of the Manitoba Trappers’ Association, which hosts the event. “And with several buyers vying for their goods, they get better prices. Plus, the event is held in mid-December, so folks can do their Christmas shopping at the malls while they’re here.”

Dave Bewick of Toronto-based North American Fur Auctions, the continent’s largest fur auction house, is the first dealer behind the tables. He takes the first trapper’s forms and begins counting and closely examining his hides – flipping stacks of round beaver pelts like pancakes and peering studiously at each marten, fisher and wild mink. Then he writes down an offer for the entire lot and hands it back to the trapper, who pockets the quote and slides his wares along the table. The process is repeated with buyer number two, a representative of the North Bay, Ontario-based Fur Harvester’s Auction. Then it’s on to Thompson’s local independent buyer, Bruno Decesco, and finally past Jason White and Norm Byman of the North West Company – formerly the Hudson’s Bay Company.

At the end of the tables the trapper has four quotes and a choice to make. He can take the full value offered by Decesco or the North West Company, or he can go with consignment offers from Bewick or the Fur Harvesters’ Auction, both of which pay about 60 per cent up front and then take the furs to major international auctions in New York and Toronto. If demand is high, the trapper will get another big cheque in the spring. But it’s a gamble, since fur prices fluctuate annually. Wives, fathers and elders are brought in for a brief huddle, then the trapper hands the paper to the winning dealer and watches with a grin as crisp new \$100 bills are counted onto the table.

Throughout the day the mixed aroma of coffee, hot dogs and musky furs wafts through the hall. Numbers are called and the trappers move down the seats in a musical-chairs parade. Mounds of furs are pushed past dealers feverishly totalling numbers on their calculators. Meanwhile, kids race around and elders sip tea, nibble homemade bannock and chat. For many, the Fur Table is their only vacation outside their tiny home communities. “It’s as much a family reunion as a fur auction,” says

Christina Massan of Gillam.

Phillip Bighetty, the elder who gave the opening prayer, is a founding Fur Table board member attending his 33rd auction. He spent his life trapping in the wilderness and spawned a fur-trading empire: Today, 16 of his kids have brought furs to sell. Bighetty says he’s happy prices are up and that martens – the mainstay of the Northern Manitoba trapping industry – are fetching an average of \$90 per pelt. Full-time trappers, he says, can make as much as \$50,000 a year these days. And although he no longer journeys out as he used to – for a month at a time, loading his snowmobile onto a bush plane to get more than 80 kilometres outside of Brochet, where the trapping is better – he still hits the trapline. “I keep 65 dogs as an insurance policy,” he says with a grin, “because they don’t run out of gas.”

MANITOBA’S FURS go far: Most will end up in China, Russia and South Korea, where business is good. “In the last couple of years, [the market] has really been taking off,” Fur Council of Canada spokesman Alan Herscovici told the *Globe and Mail* in November 2012. Fur is back on fashion runways; it was featured in hundreds of top designer collections this year. Throughout Canada there are roughly 70,000 licensed trappers; they produced \$14.9 million of wild pelts in 2009-2010, the last year Statistics Canada kept records. Manitoba itself has over 8,000 licensed trappers and in recent years the province’s wild fur industry earned more than \$4 million annually. Manitoba trapping received a boost with the worldwide popularity of Canada Goose parkas; initially all the company’s coyote hood trim came from the province.

“Our licensed trapper numbers are up from a low of 3,500 in 2000, which shows our education programs are working,” says Cherry White of the Manitoba Trappers’ Association. “We may be two generations away from trapping, but we’re making progress.” Most of that progress is evident in the surprising number of enthusiastic teenaged trappers at the Fur Table, part of a push to engage young people in the age-old industry. Some learn the trade from their parents and grandparents while others attend special school programs that teach humane trapping techniques. “There’s a lot of interest,” says White. Up to 300 students enrol in trapper courses every year, and often the majority of them are children.

Many Northern towns, including Thompson, have community traplines for elders and youth, as well as exclusive youth lines for kids

under 18. The 70-kilometre-long Thompson youth trapline is where 12-year-old Hannah MacMillan heads with her dad by snowmobile in the dark three evenings a week. Today she’s wide-eyed with excitement as she shows the buyers the 10 “marties,” three beavers, two weasels, one mink and one muskrat that she trapped since earning her licence in the fall. “My dad taught me and I love it. It’s exciting not knowing what I caught in my 11 traps,” she says as Dave Bewick counts out

\$750 in front of her. “I’m going to buy Christmas presents,” she says. “And the rest goes in the bank.”

It’s kids as young as six who are most avidly watching demonstrations taking place throughout the day. “Fur handling is an art,” says Pete Wise of the North American Wild Fur Shippers Council. He’s demonstrating how to skin a beaver – something a pro can do “in 78 seconds,” he says. He shows various traps,” she says as Dave Bewick counts out

CONTINUED ON PAGE 69

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*Cherry White
Manitoba Trappers*

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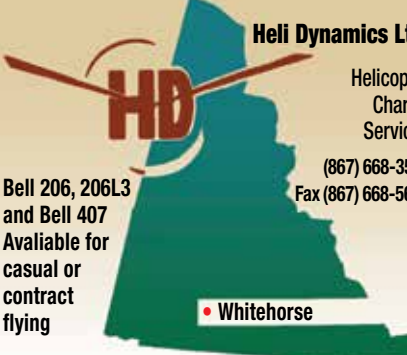


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techniques to prepare lynx and mink pelts, including using traditional skinning tools like moose ribs. "Waste nothing," he says, drawing an "ooohh" from the crowd as he squeezes oil from a gland. "Put it in trees to attract more game." Every year, thousands of dollars are lost due to improperly handled fur, so throughout the Fur Table there's an emphasis on improving pelt preparation - everything from using the proper size of trap or snare to drying, brushing, stretching and storing. "You can ruin a prime fur by mishandling it, or get more money from a well-prepared mediocre fur," says Wise. Even the buyers take the time to show trappers how they could have better finished their pelts, for instance by trimming around a wolverine's paws.

In the meantime, along the back of the hall, rows of booths and tables offer discounted trapping supplies, wire snares, various sizes of "forming" boards for stretching and finishing pelts, and smelly animal lures like Marten Magic, which reeks like a skunk. Vendors are selling handmade beaded moccasins, mitts and purses. A trap-setting demonstration draws a stampede of kids, and several boys wearing Davy Crockett hats cradle traps handed out by Manitoba Hydro. Also on display are prizes donated by the local Canadian Tire and Giant Tiger stores - the winner of the wolf-calling competition walks away with a giant Christmas turkey. And, for good measure, one booth is even offering flu shots.

"I can't believe the quality of furs this year," dealer Bruno Decesco says in a strong Italian accent as he examines a stack of fisher pelts. "The environment has been good. I haven't seen animals this healthy in 40 years." Decesco left Italy as a teenager and by 1958 was working in Northern Manitoba, mostly on mine and dam construction. He ended up buying six taxis in Leaf Rapids in the early 1970s. "We would pick up trappers coming in from the bush carrying huge bags of fur. We called them Santa Clauses on the taxi radio," he laughs. But he noticed that they were selling their furs to the Hudson Bay Company "for nothing," so he began buying the pelts himself. Then he would ship them to Winnipeg, getting a good price for both the trappers and himself. For 30 years he was the only independent fur dealer in Northern Manitoba; now, he says, there are more than 100.

Suddenly, there's a commotion down the table. Wayne Lavallee and his son, Wayne Lavallee Jr., are unloading 55 beaver, 33 marten, 21 ermine, 20 fisher, 20 mink, plus everything from muskrats to racoons. Their lot covers four full tables; they trapped it all since October 15. "They worked the bush hard for this," says

an impressed Jason White of the North West Company. In the end, they accept an offer of \$7,800 and watch happily as their salary for months of toil is counted out before them.

By closing time at 5 p.m., nearly 100 trappers are still waiting to sell their furs. They'll be back tomorrow morning, and by the close of the Fur Table on the second day, more than \$683,000 will have changed hands - the highest amount paid out at the Fur Table in more than 30 years. Over at the malls, where goods

are being snapped up so fast that managers are helping restock the shelves, crowds of shoppers are pushing heaped carts across the packed parking lots. In the darkness, truck beds are piled high with furniture, appliances, toys and construction material. Snowmobiles are roped down on trailers. Then, one by one, the laden trucks join a line of traffic disappearing in a shroud of steam down the road, headed for far flung trapping outposts with names like York Landing, Cross Lake and Thicket Portage. **UP**



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