

Trapping Fox

By Denise Michaud

In Upper Madawaska County, Denis Martin and Antoine Bélanger are well known. In actual fact, they come from Baker Brook and Saint Hilaire respectively. Both are skillful trappers. They know all the secrets and all the techniques of trapping. Both have practiced that trade for many years.

Antoine Bélanger accepted to share his secrets. Both experience and knowledge are prerequisites in this field. Mr. Bélanger began trapping when he was 13 years old. He learned the elements of that trade from his uncle. In the beginning, he was doing it to gain some pocket money. During the Depression of 1929, times were hard and one needed much inventiveness to survive. Trapping fox was a way to make a few dollars. Fox fur collars were the fad in those days. Pelts were sold to Joe Vender, a fur merchant, established on Canada Road. During the "hard days" a beaver pelt could get you one dollar.

Mr. Antoine Bélanger set his snares during the fall season. It is the ideal season for trapping. In spring and summer, animal fur is of low quality. During winter, hunting is made difficult because of snow. It is preferable to set the traps in abandoned roads or near the forest. The fox often looks for food in fields not far from the forest, where he can easily seek refuge in case of danger.

The snares are made with galvanized steel wires. One snare requires a wire that is four feet and a half (1.4 m) in length. The snare must be carefully made. Unlike other animals that rush forward to free themselves, the fox stops, backs-up and tries slowly to free himself.

The snare, set vertically 3 inches (8 cm) above the ground, must be tied strongly to a horizontal branch. On each side of the snare, branches should be placed so that the fox will be guided into the trap.

A fox is a very cunning animal; great precautions must be taken to catch it.

First, do not disturb the natural elements in the vicinity of the snares.

Secondly, avoid leaving an odor that is unfamiliar to the fox. A fox can detect human odor up to five or six days after the passage of a human. One must always wear the same clothes without ever washing them. One should never be accompanied by another person. Check the snares only every 3 or 4 days. All this is done to eliminate odors as much as possible. Knowing those techniques will assure success in hunting.

Once your have caught a fox, you must prepare the pelt before selling it.

In a first step, the animal must be skinned. To remove the skin of a fox, as for a hare, start by breaking the hind legs. You will need a helper to hold it while you cut the skin from the heel up to the rectum and this for each leg. Cut around the rectum to prevent it from coming with the skin. Remove the skin of the leg and thigh and, with care, take the tail out of the fur. Rip off the skin by pulling on it down on all sides simultaneously and cut the tendons and muscles that hold the skin. Once you reach the front legs, remove the skin as if pulling a sleeve from the shoulder to the end of the leg and cut the part of the end of the leg that contains the hand so as to keep it in the skin. Keep skinning the neck in the same way that you removed the skin from the body. Then go down towards the head. Upon reaching the ears, cut close to the skull to keep the ear cartilage, and be careful not to make a hole in the skin. Remove the skin of the skull up to the eyes and cut the skin that holds it around the eyes. Keep bringing the skin down to the mouth and keep the nose.

In a second step, the skin should be cleansed of all flesh residue. Once you have finished skinning the fox, the skin is inside out. Keep it that way; then tie it by passing a rope through the hole of the eyes and hang it up to dry for 24 hours. You must not let it dry too long, as it could lose its hair. Scrape the inside with a knife to remove the fat or tendons that have stuck to the skin. You can also wash the skin with soap after scraping it. Don't forget to insert a little stick in the tail while drying the skin to prevent hair loss.

The third step consists in molding the skin of the fox. After drying it, turn the skin right side out and place it on a mould. The mould is made of spruce wood and built in three parts. The central part of the mould allows adjustment according to the width of the skin. That part adjusts the mould by moving the front or the back. The edges of the mould must be rounded to prevent cuts to the skin. Place the mould inside the skin and adjust the central part to set the mould at the same size as the skin without stretching it too much. Insert the mould up to the nose and nail the hind legs on the protruding ends of the mould. Leave the skin on the mould for about four to five days.

Finally, before selling the fox pelt, remove it from the mould, comb it and brush to cleanse it of all impurities.

Trapping and the fur trade are two activities that require a lot of experience and know-out. Antoine Bélanger has these two assets that make him an accomplished “coureur de bois” He loves this trade where man confronts nature and conquers it. What a pleasure to have the upper hand and be able to capture an animal as cunning and skillful as a fox, Mr. Bélanger told us that one of the most tragic moments of his life was when he learned that his wife, while spring-cleaning the house, had put his hunting garments and tools in the garbage-can.