Kirby Avery
Skins an Otter

Article by Terry Swanner

How many fur coats have you seen in your lifetime? The answer to that question is probably a few here and there. The first thing you may have noticed was how smooth and luxurious the fur was and how the light seemed to dance and glimmer on the thick richness of it. While you admire the beauty of the fur, have you ever given a thought to how such a coat came to be? Probably not, but it is a most interesting subject.

Fur coats, whether they be of fox, mink, or raccoon, just do not suddenly appear by themselves on racks of expensive clothing stores. They arrive there from the factories after a delicate process, the first step of which is skinning and curing.

Mr. Kirby Avery understands the process of skinning and curing a skin, the technique and precision needed to do the job correctly. Mr. Avery is a part time farmer and full time fireman for the Washington, N. C., Fire Department.

Mr. Avery lives in a small rural community in the Bath township, and it is here in his workshop that Mr. Avery expertly demonstrated the craft of skinning. Mr. Avery traps and skins animals mostly as a sideline job and as a hobby. He sets out his own traps and checks them periodically for a catch. It was on one such trip that he discovered an otter in one of his traps.

An otter in his winter coat is a fine catch as it is the winter coat that is the most desirable of all fur bearing animals for trapping. (This winter coat is called "prime" by trappers. See Claudie Taylor article in December '81 Life on the Pamlico.) An otter can weigh in at anywhere from 18 to 22 pounds and is all muscle, teeth, and claws, a very powerful animal, indeed.

By the time we had arrived at Mr. Avery's home, he had the animal ready to work on. The animal had been washed to remove any dirt from the fur. It was then brushed with a wire brush to remove any burns that may have been in the fur and was now hanging upside down from a rafter, suspended by a cord tied around a hind leg.

Using a very sharp pocket knife, Mr. Avery made an incision in the underside of the tail all the way to the rump; the cut was continued along the underside of both hind legs and around the rear paws at the ankles.

When the incisions were completed, Mr. Avery then proceeded to peel the hide from the tip of the tail all the way down to the head. He then repeated the process of cutting the hide along the wrists of the front paws and around the head, being very careful not to puncture any major blood vessels as blood-
stains would ruin a good hide. After these final incisions were made, the hide was pulled over the head and off.

The removal of the hide is the most laborious part of the job because of the many ligaments connecting the hide to the body. Once the hide was removed, it was turned inside out so that the skin side of the hide was now showing. Then it was stretched over a fleshing beam.

A fleshing beam, which looks very much like an ironing board, is used in conjunction with what is called a fleshing knife. This knife is a bowed blade with wooden handles on both ends. The knife is drawn over the skin to remove any excess fat and grease; it is important to try to get all the fat and grease off of the hide as these will ruin the curing of the hide.

While Mr. Avery was fleshing the hide, he told us a few facts about the value of various furs and animals. The money is in raccoon fur, which often sells for as much as $20.00 to $25.00 for a good quality hide. A good hide will have a white flesh color, rather than a grayish blue color of a poorer quality hide. The colors change with the seasons, with the poorer quality found in November and the better quality found in the colder months. He also said otter fur will sell for pretty much the same price as the raccoon, but no furs will bring good money if they aren't prepared properly.

When Mr. Avery finished fleshing the hide, he removed it from the fleshing board and placed the hide in a bucket of corn meal. The corn meal will soak up any excess grease and fat left over from the fleshing process. The hide was rolled around in the corn meal for a few minutes and was then popped several times in the air to remove the corn meal. The hide was combed to remove any snarls in the fur and then made ready for the final process of being stretched over a stretching board.

A stretching board is a tapered plank that again resembles a small ironing board. The hide was tacked on the board with aluminum alloy tacks; these are used to prevent rust from spoiling the fur. The hide was then placed in a cool area out of the sun, to avoid tainting the fur, to dry and cure.

Mr. Avery told us that great care must be taken in all areas of the process so as not to cut or tear holes in the hide as this will detract from the value of any fur. The last thing Mr. Avery did was to cut away unwanted skin at the bottom of the stretched hide to form a hole called a sight window through which a potential buyer can see the fur he is buying. This is necessary because the correct way for a hide to cure is to be tacked to the board inside out with the skin side showing. Proper curing will take several days.

From wild animal to fur coat, there is a lot of hard work involved long before the fur ever gets to the sewing machine, and most of that work is done by people like Mr. Kirby Avery, a man whose skill with a pocket knife and an animal's hide is unquestionable.
Fresh caught otter, bobcat.

Brushing fur.

First cut along tail.

Peeling the hide.

Removing fat and grease, hide pulled over fleshing beam.
Rubbing corn meal into hide.

"Popping" hide to remove corn meal.

Tacking hide down onto stretching board.

Finished product, fur visible through window cut in hide.