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Letter to Dr. Frank G. Speck 1941

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F. L. L.
Speck
Correspondence

173 Wilson Street, Brewer, Me
March 7, 1941

Dr. Frank G. Speck
Philadelphia.

Dear Doctor Speck:

It is fine of you to take in such good part my criticism of some details of your work and I appreciate your friendly spirit. "Digging for the truth" sometimes means getting cut with our own tools. And it happens to all of us.

Thank you for the notes by Miss Stimson, whose statements both about moose wool and mink climbing I am glad to see. That is a very pleasant account of the tame mink, and I would go beyond what she does and say that a mink can climb much higher than she claims here did. I have seen a dog climb twice as high up a tree! However, neither a dog nor a mink is an arboreal animal. And your book does not tell us how the Indians made such a hole or got the skewers through the wood. If it was Mr. Orchard's work, that explains a good deal. They mercilessly hazed him, finding him gullible.

I will not go into details, but if you wish to learn a bit about trapping in Maine, I would suggest that you look up old files of Forest and Stream, in which are some of my father's contributions. The longest was a series of nine papers beginning May 7, 1910 (the year he died) called "A Fall Fur Hunt". It told of nine weeks he and another young man spent trapping upon Caucongococ waters in 1859. My brother illustrated the articles, and those pictures of traps can be depended upon as correct. In one of the papers you will find an account of old Franceway penas (your number 19) who during the fifties certainly had not been hunting about Munsungan.

To return to mink, they can climb to a certain extent-- but they do not do it habitually. They also may be trapped a half mile or even a mile from water-- but no hunter sets traps on purpose to get them in such a place. A hunter sets his traps where he thinks the creature is likely to go; and he sets them in a way as easy as he knows how, provided it will hold the game. The trouble with Mr. Orchard's trap is that it was to be put where the mink wouldn't be; it wouldn't hold him if he got pricked on the pins; and it could not be made by a native without tools unless he used a woodpecker's hole. Those birds do not arrange their nests for the express purpose of having them used as mink traps.

Finally-- and this I think is important-- do you recall Rasles's name for a mink? His only definition is "another stinking beast", so perhaps you do not remember. M8sbess8. It means "a wet creature". If the Indians gave it that name, they did not set their traps for it in trees!

About moose-wool, Miss Stimson has given a good demonstration of what can be done, and it is very interesting. It is not proof, however, that the Indians did it. A diamond can be made from coal-- but it is not practical.

Granting that the wool could be collected and spun, as Miss Stimson shows that it can be, there are some questions which have to

be answered: what did they use for knitting needles? why do not some of the old travellers speak of it? why did they not knit stockings instead of mittens? You will remember that they used "foot-rags" inside their moccasins, though they needed socks more than mittens. You may also remember that at the period of coming over here our own ancestors were not wearing knitted stockings, but "Irish hose" of cloth. Finally, why waste time in doing work like this when they had all the skins and leather they wanted, much warmer than anything they could manufacture.

In spite of the demonstration I still say that a "moose has no wool"--for of course I meant nothing that could not be obtained in sufficient quantity to be an object. One could demonstrate that a Mexican hairless dog has hair, but if you really needed dogs' hair you wouldn't take that sort of a dog to get it from. There is hardly a creature in the woods, except the tiniest, from which you could not get more fibre of this sort than you can from a moose. My political economy professor once said that decades before--and he said it long, long ago-- they once put a tariff on pineapples because some one in Rhode Island wanted to grow them under glass and be protected. Yarn from moose-wool is a commodity of similar scarcity and uncommercial value.

I think I can speak with some weight upon the subject of moose and moosehair. When I was a child my father was doing a considerable business in selling Indian-tan moose moccasins to lumbermen. He would sometimes sell a hundred dozen on one order in Minnesota. The hides were bought of the hunters, many of them unshaved. I witnessed the process of shaving them and I saw the shaved hair sorted by some of the neighbors' half-grown boys and packed in sacks to sell to carriage makers for stuffing cushions, etc. I know well what I saw, because in very cold winter weather the boys worked in the second story of the "chaise house" and I used to carry up hot soapstones for them to warm their hands and feet. I know there was no wool in those great piles of hair from winter-killed moose, which lay about in bunches of iron-grey hair. In the winter the hair was long and light, and in those days it was legal to kill all the moose a hunter pleased in the deep snow. The sample you send was taken in the fall when the creature is short-haired and looks almost black when the sun shines on him. The winter moose looks wholly different and it would not be worth while to tease out the fine und-recoating from the long, stiff hair when so many things would give so much more easily.

About porpoise hunting I think I do know something. When you visit the Peabody at Harvard next you can see there the big Quoddy canoe I gave with its full equipment for seal and porpoise hunting. My father bought it in 1874 and sailed around from Westport to Bangor in it and we often used it at Camden in summer. His days of seal and porpoise hunting were over by 1870, but he was an expert at it. Few of our Penobscots could do it at the time he enjoyed the sport.

A much longer letter than I anticipated! I fear that getting old I am getting garrulous too; but speaking of these old and bygone things brings up so many shades of the past-- Time Was.

With best wishes

Cordially,