

A FAMILY AFFAIR: DERICKSON FAMILY TRAPLINE

Registration #0812 to 017, 1926
West Kettle River Valley

One morning, my phone rang. When I answered it, Raymond Derickson, an Indigenous friend of mine from the Westbank First Nation, said, “Hey Geneva, I am taking a group of scientists up to the cabin and a tour of my trapline. Would you consider baking me a couple dozen bannock to go with the moose stew I am cooking up for them?”

With those words, a wonderful cross-cultural trade agreement began—bannock for salmon; bannock for a moose, deer or elk roast; bannock for moose sausage or even bannock for moose pepperoni--more tasty than can be purchased at any corner deli.

And it isn't even traditional baking powder bannock that I bake, but white dinner rolls. Raymond got “hooked” on my “bannock” when he and his wife, Carol, invited me, a white woman, to join their extended family for Christmas dinner two years ago. I had taken the rolls as my contribution to their wonderful holiday feast.

Every time Raymond and I do our “cross-cultural exchange of goods,” he teaches me a little bit more about traplines, trapping, and a traditional way of life that goes back at least 3,000 years for the Sylix people of the Okanagan.

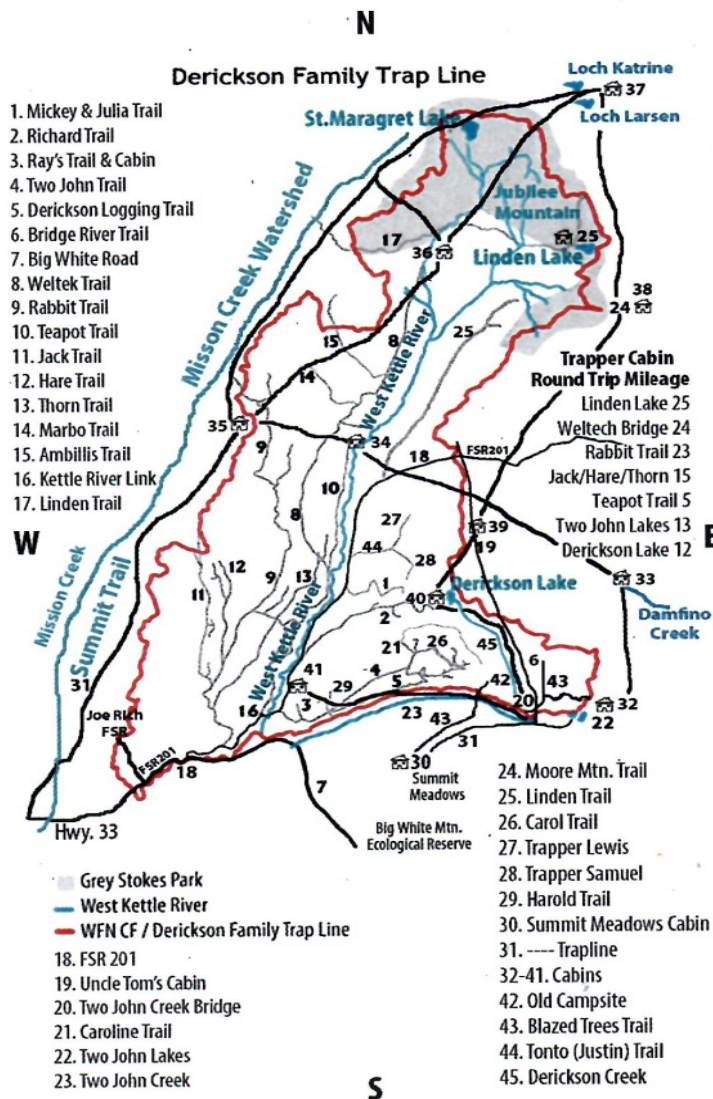
According to the Wildlife Act of British Columbia, a trapline is “an area for which registration is granted to one or more licensed trappers for the trapping of fur-bearing animals.” In a Kelowna Daily Courier article called "A Way of Life," Harold Derickson, Raymond's younger brother and Westbank First Nation Councillor, was quoted as saying that “furry animals” have been stumbling into the traps of Native people for hundreds of years in the area which would become the Derickson Family Trapline. For sure, the traditional trapline has been in the family since 1846, before confederation.

In early 1926, some Native men were arrested and taken into custody by the Osoyoos game warden for trapping on the Okanagan River, an area outside of their local Reserve. Their traps were confiscated. At that time, most game wardens did not acknowledge or respect the claim of Aboriginal trapping rights. The men had to wait in jail for two months before the trial could take place. An Agent from Indian Affairs advocated for them in a letter to the Assistant Deputy of Indian Affairs in Ottawa. On the court date, the judge arrived by horse and buggy. They won the case and were awarded trapping rights within five-mile distance adjacent to the Okanagan River.

This judgement was part of a much larger court case which ended in the regulation that all traplines in British Columbia must be registered; however, it was not mandatory for Indigenous trappers to become licensed. Many Native trappers still resisted being regulated, even if registration would decrease conflict with white trappers and avoid trapline-jumping. The government also hoped that regulation would promote fur-bearing animal conservation practices. Now Native people, treaty and non-treaty, have aboriginal rights and can hunt and trap throughout the year.

When Edward Mickey Derrickson, Raymond Derickson's grandfather, received a letter in the mail asking him to register his trapline, he rode his saddle horse from Westbank to the Indian Affairs office in Vernon. There he requested that the Indian Agent write a letter for him to the British Columbia

government requesting that his trapline be registered. This was done in October of 1926 under the British Columbia Game Act. The Derickson trapline is in the Mission Creek Watershed on BC crown land. It lies behind Big White Mountain, comprising approximately one hundred forty thousand acres of bush, forests, lakes, creeks, meadows and the West Kettle River. Trapline notices were posted at several points along the old trail.



Mickey Derrickson was still alive in 1949 and was one of the speakers when the Cairn commemorating the Okanagan Brigade Trail and the exploration of the Okanagan by the fur traders was erected. He spoke of the old times and told colorful stories of his ancestor, William Pion, a packer and interpreter for the North West and the Hudson's Bay Fur Companies.

At the end of his life, Mickey willed the trapline to his three sons, Richard, Harry, and David, all who belonged to the Westbank First Nation. There have been four generations of Dericksons trapping in the West Kettle area ever since.

When several logging companies moved into the area, conflict was inevitable between trapping and logging rights, and some companies were taken to court to clarify trapping vs. logging rights. Forestry is now being operated by WFN's corporate division, under Ntityix Resources, creating skills, training and job opportunities for WFN members.

More of Mickey's descendants have since been added to the membership list of the trapline. However, currently it is Raymond, his sons, Chris, Graham and Aaron, and his cousin, Russell, who are working the trapline. Raymond particularly enjoys winter at the trapper cabin as he says, "It is so peaceful, warm and cozy there, with the snow coming down and the coffee pot on." It is important to him that his children and his grandchildren are introduced to life on the trapline and learn about how their ancestor earned his living off the land.

However, the duties and responsibilities while at the cabin and on the trapline don't leave Raymond and his sons too much time for lazing around. Besides the upkeep on the cabin, the combined tool and wood shed, and the skinning shed, they need to check the traps every three days. In this process,

they are always observing the health of the environment on which the trapline is based. It is important that it be kept in balance.

They collect the dead animals from the traps and reset them with bait which is usually waste meat from moose, elk or deer. The fur-bearing animals that the Dericksons trap are: marten, cougar, lynx, timber wolf, coyote, squirrel, weasel and raccoon. Because there are grizzly bears in the area that sometimes also “check the traps,” they carry a 30-30 rifle at all times for self-protection.

On their return to the trapper cabin, the animals are then taken to the skinning shed for skinning and board drying. The hides are turned inside out for the drying process and stretched on boards. The larger pieces of meat are cut up to use as bait for the larger animal traps. The entrails are left for the multitude of crows and ravens that enjoy the feast and, according to Raymond, “They sing in the nearby bushes and trees, thanking us for providing food for them.”

A small royalty is paid to the British Columbia government by the trapper for each fur sold, auctioned or even given away. A bobcat brings the highest royalty to the government--seven dollars; the squirrel the least amount—fifty cents.

In 2015, twelve old trapping cabins and some campsites were discovered along the trails, one of them on Two John Creek. The campsite was gone over with a metal detector, and many old relics were found, like old soup and powdered milk cans. Westbank First Nations’ archaeology team was asked to investigate the sites in order to document the time period that they were in use.

Raymond and Professor Robin Dods, an environmental archeologist, discovered a series of trees that had been blaze-marked along the old trapline trails. There were various ages of blazing, some recent and some perhaps dating back many decades. They hope that further study and mapping in July of this year will reveal the changing trapping practices over the years.

The Derickson family trapper cabin and the traplines are not only valuable assets to the Derickson’s way of life, but to the Westbank and other First Nation communities. WFN has held programs there: snowshoeing, wolf snaring, cultural awareness, life skills, Elder programs, trail work training for Forestry. The site has also been used by non-Indigenous groups and organizations for educational and research purposes. In 2018 and 2019, the Okanagan Nation Alliance planted trout into Derickson Lake. The planting proved successful. Prior to the start of the programs on the trapline, Elders are often invited to give a cultural blessing to the endeavors.

In 2015-2016, a three-month experimental program to catch and release live lynx was conducted through a partnership between the Wildlife Division of the Okanagan Nation Alliance and the Derickson Family Trap Line. The goal was to devise a safe way to understand the movement of Lynx through the West Kettle River area and the genetic relationship of the Okanagan cats to those in Washington State.

Humans are not the only visitors who appear at the trapper cabin. One time, when Raymond had shot a moose, he was not able to transport all of the meat at one time. So he left the hindquarters alongside the road, intending to return. When he did, there was no moose; instead, there were huge

grizzly tracks leading off toward the trees. The snow was about four inches deep at the time, prints measuring approximately 18 by 9 ½ or so inches. The average size of a grizzly’s paw, back to front without the claws is fifteen inches; a paw of 24 inches is close to the world record—and a very large grizzly!



Grizzly paw, 18” heel to toe



Grizzly prints – he walked away with the rest of the moose

Raymond said, “We assumed that it was the same bear that came back to my trapper cabin the next evening and created a path of destruction. From all appearances, he had been watching us from behind a big tree.”

The grizzly went to the skinning shed where the all the rat cubbies were stored with rat food already in them, ready for distribution along the trapline. A cubby is a three-sided box with an open front. Bait is placed in the back of the cubby, and the trap is hidden in the front in a way that an animal is trapped. On the way to its dinner, the trap snaps shut and the animal is caught instead. Raymond explained that these cubbies were for trapping rats, not grizzlies! “This grizzly felt hungry,” he said, “so he destroyed the cubbies and ate all the rat food. He also mangled Raymond’s entire collection of marten cubbies.”

The destruction continued as he ripped the wall off part of the west side of the skinning shed and ripped the window right out of the wall. He could do this because when he stood on hind legs, he was ten feet tall.

The huge grizzly then went across the yard to Raymond’s toolshed, which also serves as the woodshed. There, he tore the corner off, and it, too, had to be covered with plywood.

He said, “Come Friday morning, all that was left were broken boxes. When an animal weighs up to 2,000 pounds, they have a lot of strength.”

When asked about his plans and hopes for the future, Raymond has big dreams. In the short term, he hopes to obtain a summer grant in order for Dr. Dods, and a crew of three students from the Westbank First Nation, to conduct an environmental/archeological survey of his grandfather’s trapper cabin and the environment surrounding it. The archeological dig around the cabin should

yield more historical information. Core samples of the blazed trees and of the surrounding soil will reveal ecological changes through time.

In the long term, Raymond hopes that the research on the remaining eleven trapper cabins and their ecological environments will continue. He wants the Derickson Family Trapline to become a teaching and research centre where students and researchers can not only experience the traditional ways of their ancestors, but also learn about environmental sustainability.

Raymond dreams of a never-ending future for the trapline, a place where the Derickson children, grandchildren and greatgrandchildren will continue what was started long ago, before confederation.

Geneva Ensign with information and photos provided by Raymond N. Derickson, trapper.

Sources:

Derickson, Raymond, Trapper. Personal Interviews

Derickson, Raymond, "Derickson Family Trap Line, Progress Report of Trapping Season, Westbank First Nation, May, 2016.

Documents, Indian Affairs, RG10m, Volume 6735, file 420-3B & 3, 1926.

Document, Edward Mickey Derrickson's Application of a Trap Line, B.C. – Game Act, October 8, 1926, Vernon, B.C.

Gellatly Hewlett, Dorothy, "A Bit of Okanagan History," Kelowna, pp. 2-29.

Harding, John, "A Way of Life: Interview with Harold Derickson, WFM Councillor." Kelowna Daily Courier, unknown date.