

Hensley's Fur House

By Dan Slais

Small town existence in the Ozarks had its focus on the general store. Goods were both bought and sold. Many times the trade or barter system was the method of exchange. Included at the store were staple items for family needs. Grocery items for example were as simple as sugar, coffee, and sewing materials.

The 1800 Ozarkians were very self sufficient. Early Pulaski County people lived off the land. The harvesting of berries, fruits, roots, and herbs was typical. On the farm, gardens, livestock, and crops supplied many of the necessities. Hunting and harvesting animals for meat were a key to a successful family farm. However, the general store was an important place for selling or trading surplus things in exchange for things that could not be made or grown on the farm. Items such as milk, cream, eggs, chickens, and crops were handled by the store. Fur and fur buyers were another important piece of the exchange. A five dollar fur at the turn of the century was a substantial item. Five dollars was a

significant amount of money.

Since the trappers and fur market dealers were actually many of the explorers of Missouri and other states west, the economy and importance of raw fur was a key. When general stores could buy furs, it made a place or town on the map where market dealers could stop. Many general stores bought furs and this is how Hensley's Fur actually got started.

Clarence Hensley was born in 1899 just south of the old Wire Road, pre-66 (and Interstate 44). This is in the west Laquey area near the Berean Baptist Church. As a part of a family of nine children, he knew the typical farming operation well. As a teenager, he became an avid hunter and trapper and was known for his shooting ability, a "crack shot." His education stopped after his high school sophomore year and Clarence began to teach school. He taught for five years in area schools, such as Fairview, Bellfount, and Hancock. He was quoted as saying, "never liked teaching because I never liked confinement."

Clarence Hensley and Ethel

Walters were married in 1918.

Their first winter was made easier when Clarence caught and sold two skunks and a coon. Soon they moved to Waynesville and lived in what is now the Les Bales house on School Street. The building on Bailey Street behind the house became the "Grocery" store. As most stores went, they bought and traded in eggs, cream, produce, wool, roots, and fur. As time went on, the Hensleys had nine children and the store became a true family business.

The store jobs involved candling eggs, testing for cream, handling chickens, grain, meat, and fur. The business had plenty of work for everyone. The fur business picked up in the winter to offset the summer growing season. Son Dwight Hensley remembers security duties performed as father Clarence came in late in the evening and placed burlap sacks of mink pelts under the children's beds.

Clarence had bought limited amounts of fur even previous to opening the store. However, it was gradually becoming the mainstay of



CLARENCE HENSLEY in front of Hensley's Fur and Hide, 1950, when it was located near West School.

the work. The upstairs above the store was used to handle and store the fur. St. Louis was still a major fur trade center. The F. C. Taylor Company was a common buyer of Hensley's Furs, as well as the Hudson Bay Company of New York, Winnipeg, Canada, and other

Equal Housing Lender

FULL
SERVICE
BANK

State Bank of Dixon

Serving the Community Since 1920

759-2121 "Your Hometown Bank" Dixon, MO

THERE'S NOTHING LIKE STAYING WITH THE HOMETOWN BANK
YOU'VE ALWAYS KNOWN...LIKE THE STATE BANK OF DIXON.
THEY KNOW YOU BY YOUR NAME...KNOW HOW MANY CHILDREN YOU
HAVE...KNOW IF YOU'VE HADA NEW ARRIVAL...KNOW IF YOU ARE
A WAITRESS...KNOW IF YOU ARE IN THE CAR BUSINESS...
PUMP GAS...CUT LOGS. STATE BANK OF DIXON MAKES YOU
FEEL LIKE YOU'RE THEIR ONLY CUSTOMER.

BANK WITH YOUR FRIENDS AT STATE BANK OF DIXON IN DOWNTOWN DIXON.

We're More Than Just A Bank

dealers in Europe.

An additional building was used with the Hensley business in the 1930's. It was called the "Skunk House," possibly after Little Abner's "Skunk House." During the 1940's, the "Skunk House" became a first assignment art project for students who could view from the high school across the street. The building maintained its name after the Waynesville School District bought the property in the 1980's. The "Skunk House" was used as a garage for several years. Today, this building and the original store and fur building have all been removed.

Animal ecology itself has changed in the Ozarks. In the 1800's there were not as many trees. In Henry Rowes Schoolcraft's *Ozark Journal, 1818-1819*, he speaks of large open prairies in areas around Pulaski County. Clarence Hensley remembered stories that reported a person could see from ridge top to ridge top without trees. Raccoons were almost rare. Deer in the early 1900's were seldom seen. With the increase of family farms and forestation, animal populations changed. Clarence said he saw no deer in the county until the 1940's. Today, raccoons and deer are plentiful throughout the Ozarks.

Skunks were among the top furs in the early 1900's. Melvin Hensley explains the black furs were called "ebony" in Europe, and were the popular style. As it became known that they were skunks, styles changed. There were actually four grades of skunks: black, short stripe, narrow stripe, and broad stripe. The grade and size of the pelts affected the price. Mink became king in the 1950's. Today, raccoons make up 80 percent of the market. Prices of furs on the fur market depend on the fashion and style of coats being manufactured.

Although many synthetic materials have been developed, animal fur remains the warmest and most resistant coat material.

Hensley's Fur House had many banner years of production. In 1949, 250,000 possums were shipped through Hensley. Several years in the 1950's, 60's, and 70's, over 200,000 pelts were handled and moved through the fur house. In a typical year, family members recall 96,000 coons, 16,000 minks, 8,000 grey foxes, and 122,000 possums being shipped to St. Louis and New York. Separate deals often sent furs directly to Europe.

Several area residents remember the old fur house. Many local hunters and trappers sold fur to Hensley's. The Clarence Foster, Marvin Rose, and Harry Wrench families traded there. Many times, the fur house became a congregation area to tell hunting and trapping stories. A young trapper might pick up a tip on "how to" entice a mink to his trap. Clarence remained an avid hunter and outdoorsman throughout his career.



THE FORERUNNER OF CAMPBELL'S 66. Clarence Hensley behind the wheel of the first truck of the line that later became this famous company.

Dealing in furs, he had a direct relationship with what was happening in the hills.

Stories around the fur business are always interesting. Two young men once sold some furs to Clarence. While one was making the deal, the other located the furnished raccoons in the back of the fur house and threw twenty out behind the building. A routine inventory check later noted the missing pelts, but their fate was unknown until a few days later when the same young men brought the same pelts to the fur house to sell them once again. Immediately recognizing the stolen pelts, Clarence Hensley quietly reached for his double barreled shotgun that hung on the office wall while he conducted small talk with the men.

Getting two shotgun shells out of the desk drawer, Clarence dropped one. It rolled over where one of the fur sellers stood. The young man reached down, scooped it up, and handed it to Mr. Hensley. Once he casually loaded the gun, Clarence explained he was calling the police on them for their crime.

He maintained his community involvement and interest in education as he served on the Waynesville School Board at least three terms. School classes were always invited to take field trips to the Fur House. During the 1950-51 basketball season, he interrupted winter business to watch son Dwight play on the state playoff team. He brought traveling dealers to the gym to help cheer the Waynesville teams.

Clarence ventured into other areas as well. Produce handling, wool, roots and herbs were among examples. Clarence raised turkeys off of T highway near where Long Drive is today. He bought rabbits in quantity from locations like Warrensburg to be packed in barrels with ice and shipped to St. Louis. Handling ice and truck gardening interests were among other small concerns. Clarence was known for his sweet cantaloupes. The trucking business known as Campbell's 66 was operated for some years by Clarence Hensley. It was headquartered in Waynesville, and dispatched trucks originally from St. Louis to Joplin. When there was an opportunity to become more involved in roots and herbs, Clarence sold to the Willard McGee Company.

A SMOOTH BOY

By Georgia Hamel, 1897

The following poem, written after a fun-packed outing by young Lebanon and Buffalo men and women at Bennett Springs in June, 1897, is reprinted here to provide readers a glimpse of the social activities enjoyed by Ozark youths one hundred years ago.

The subject of Miss Hamel's poem was Frank Harris of Lebanon, who took her and six other Lebanon girls to the event. His nickname was "Brown."

There was a young fellow by the name of "Brown,"

Who went to a picnic and took all the girls in town.

Now wasn't he kind? Well, I should say!

To treat the dear girls in such a nice way,

They started out on a morning in

June,

The birds were all singing a joyful tune.

This jolly crowd numbered seven to one,

But that was just enough for fun. The road was rough, but the driver was "smooth,"

And this was a trip their hearts to soothe.

They reached the Spring and the River below,

And found a jolly crowd from Buffalo.

The day was spent as you all know,

For not one of this crowd was at all "slow."

A picture was taken on the sand, And you ought to know that it was grand.

At dinner time there were thirty-nine

That sat them down on the grass to dine.

You never saw a more bountiful spread.

Some of the boys ate till they were almost dead.

After dinner down by the bluff we went

And Oh! such a pleasant hour was spent.

When back they came some songs they sang

And the sounds through the woods so sweetly rang.

About five thirty they started to go

Off to the river toward Buffalo

Where all had supper and said good-bye,

And there was many a tear-wet eye,

For they had made a great deal of fun