

Polecat Scents Make Dollars

HOW TWO ILLINOIS FARMERS ARE MAKING MONEY FROM SALE OF POLECAT SKINS AND RENDERED FAT.

[St. Louis Post-Dispatch.]



TRAVELER through the vil-
lage of Modoc, on the Iron
Mountain Railroad, just be-
low Prairie du Rocher, Ill.,
on any balmy, sunny morn-
ing, will observe a peculiar aroma in
the atmosphere. The sense of smell,
it is said, often recalls memories lost
to all the other faculties. If so, this
peculiar odor—if the traveler lived in
the country when he was a boy—is
likely to stir up acute reminders.

It will probably recall that cele-
brated occasion when he set a steel
trap under the granary in the hope
of snaring a rat and when on the next
morning he ran hastily to see what the
trap had caught. It was a haste he
afterward regretted. Through it he
became a social pariah around the place
for several days. Even his own kith
and kin turned up their noses at him.
Wherever he went the air was per-
meated with the same aroma that is
now assailing his nostrils. It is an
unmistakable aroma—one might say a
distinctive one. It is the odor of the
festive polecat.

The polecat, or skunk, is a playful,
affectionate little creature, with beau-
tiful black and white fur, an inquisi-
tive disposition and a superabundance
of animal spirits. Its hide is valued
for its fine fur; its fat for a kind of
grease well known in rural districts,
and its two glands secrete what is
known as civet oil. Civet oil, in its
cultivated state, is used as a "fixer"
for delicate perfumes. In its natural
state civet oil is a perfume that would
scarcely be called delicate. In fact,
it is about the most undelicate perfume
imaginable, as anybody can testify
who has encountered it unexpectedly
at first hand.

That more or less of the scent of
crude civet oil should perpetually hover
over, through and around the village
of Modoc is scarcely surprising when
it is mentioned that in an inclosure
of five acres near the place there are
something like 1,400 captive polecats.
It is one of the most populous skunk
settlements in America. Here the skunk
is not an unwelcome guest. His pres-
ence means several thousands of dol-
lars a year in revenue. Moreover, no-
body minds a more or less permanent
odor, as witness those who live in Chi-
cago, or in Armourdale, Kan., or on
our own downtown river front when
the wind is strong from the northeast.
One can get used to anything—stock-
yards or skunk farms.

The Modoc skunk farm is the prop-
erty of two brothers, F. A. and Ulysses
S. Thompson. F. A. spends most of
his time in St. Louis. Ulysses S., who
is the Modoc barber and town Mar-
shal, looks after the farm. Thanks to
their 1,400 pets, the brothers are the
nabobs, the plutocrats of the village.
The polecat is a visible, tangible as-
set—easily convertible into cold, un-
aromatic cash.

The Thompson brothers were natural
trappers and, up to a few years ago,
counted upon their catch of fur-bear-
ing animals for an important part of
their income. Skunks, of course, were
extremely desirable from the trap-
per's viewpoint, as a skunk is worth
anywhere from \$3 to \$650, depending
upon the markings. But skunks were
getting scarce. The trouble and ex-
pense of catching them almost ate up
the profits. So the Thompsons hit
upon the bright idea of raising their
own skunks.

Three years ago they captured one
male and five female polecats, all of
"three-quarter" markings, that is to
say, with stripes running more than
half way down the back. These they
enclosed in a chicken-tight wire fence,
with an upper fringe of galvanized
wire 26 inches high, to prevent the
captive from escaping. The fence ex-
tended in a semicircle, its back being
a high, rocky bluff. The ground was

of rock, so that the skunks could
neither climb out nor dig out.

Skunks breed rapidly and produce
from six to ten young at a litter. New
captives were added to the originals as
rapidly as they could be taken. Thus
in three years the total grew into well
over a thousand.

The cost of feeding them is small.
They enjoy carrion and every dead
horse in the neighborhood ultimately
finds its way into one of their two
corrals—there are two of them now—
the hide of the horse selling for
enough to pay the cost of the car-
cass. In addition there is a ration of
chopped corn, which costs about \$250
a year. Also, when a skunk has been
skinned and its fat removed the rest
of its body is thrown into the corral
and is esteemed by the surviving rela-
tives of the deceased as a highly palat-
able morsel.

There is enough surface dirt in the
dens for the captives to burrow and
find winter quarters. Sometimes 30
to 40 of them live in a single hole. It
must not be imagined from this, how-
ever, that they visit around promiscu-
ously. On the contrary, they have es-
tablished clans. When one from an-
other household comes prowling
around and sticking his nose into fam-
ily affairs, he is reminded of his in-
discretion in a singularly forcible and
effective way.

The skunk is not only one of the
handsomest of American "varmints,"
he is also the boldest. He is the beau
sabreur, the Cyrano, the insouciant,
devil-may-care adventurer. Confident
in his powers of offense and defense
he goes carelessly about his way, ask-
ing only to be let alone. He is not
looking for trouble, neither is he
avoiding it.

Encounter him about sundown on a
country road and he will let you alone,
if you do not crowd him. Perhaps
he will hop along in your pathway,
keeping just far enough ahead for
your common convenience. If you are
acquainted with his little peculiarities
you will permit him to set the pace.
If you are not acquainted with them—
if, perchance, you think he is a pret-
ty, black-and-white, kittenish little
thing, and if, so thinking, you rush
up and try to make a capture, disil-
lusionment will soon be your portion.
For when you are at just the right dis-
tance he will give his white-tipped tail
a quick flirt in your general direction.

You will then pause. You will sud-
denly have lost all inclination to ad-
vance. Probably you will be nauseat-
ed; possibly half-choked and half-
blinded. All the Arabic perfumes nec-
essary to purify Lady Macbeth's little
hand wouldn't purify your apparel in
a year. You are likely to feel a long-
ing to hide from your fellow man for
some time to come. Your fellow man
is likely to reciprocate the feeling
with usury. You have committed a
gross indiscretion, a great strategic
blunder, and you will have to pay the
price. But you have added to your
stock of knowledge. Never again will
you try to kick any little polecat
around.

The oil he employs with such effective-
ness is a yellow, clear liquid, slightly
phosphorescent, so as to be faintly visible
at night. It is acid and is virtually acrid
when it falls upon any tender living
tissue. It is extremely volatile, and a
tiny drop is sufficient to fill all the sur-
rounding atmosphere with the offensive
odor. When inhaled in large quantities
it is suffocating, sometimes producing un-
consciousness and even death.

The liquid is distilled within the body
and is carried through long tubes to
small capsules imbedded in the thick
muscles at the root of the tail. The ani-
mal can discharge either or both capsules
at will, and his aim is astonishingly ac-
curate. One would never think it, but he
is very miserly with this fluid. He will
not waste it, and will even try all kinds
of bluffs to avoid using it. With animals
anywhere near his own size the skunk
prefers to fight with tooth and claw. The
conclusion, when one is in the neighbor-
hood of a skunk's recent operations, that
he is in the neighborhood of a skunk's
recent operations, that he has fired all
the oil in the universe is premature. It
smells that way, however, and this is a
pardonable error.