

## Frank Ralph Conibear (1896- )

"I have a dream — a dream that someday my trap will become the SPCA of the forests," says Frank Conibear, long-time trapper and inventor of the humane trap for fur-bearing animals.

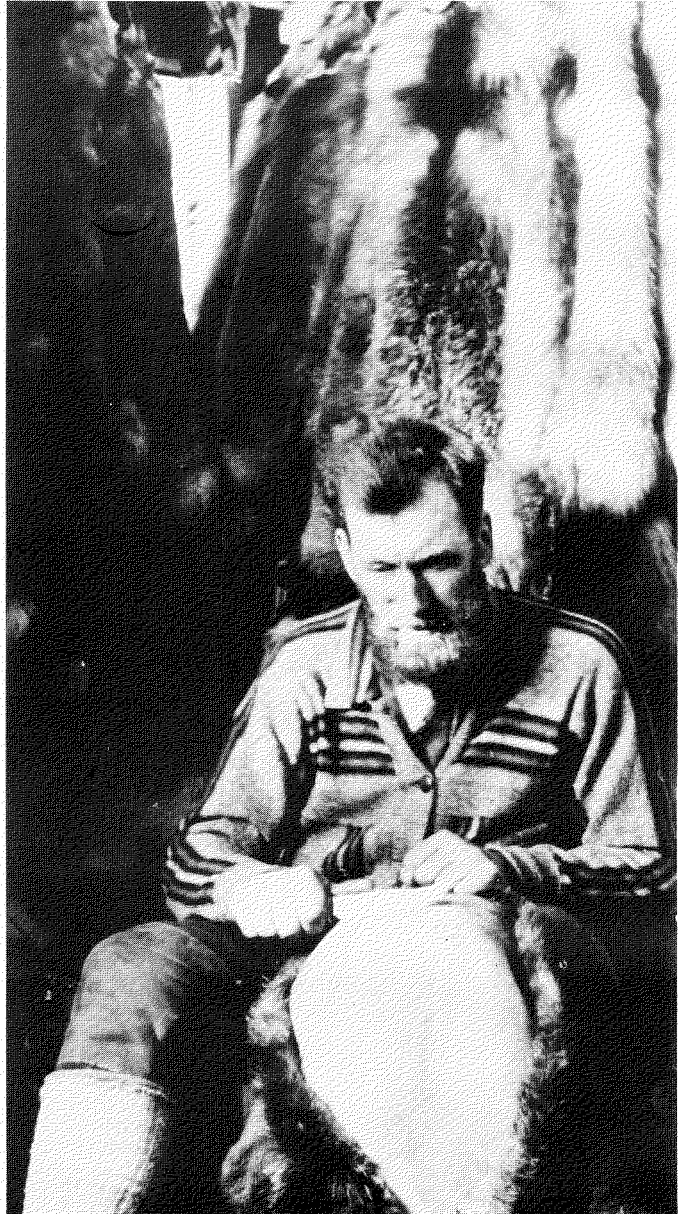
Frank Conibear was only three years old in 1899 when his family left their home in Plymouth, England, to settle in Orville, Ontario. Twelve years later the Catholic Mission in Fort Resolution, N.W.T., required an engineer for their boats, and Frank's father, Lewis Conibear, was sent to fill the position by the shipbuilding firm that employed him. The following year, in early spring, Mrs. Ada Conibear singlehandedly shepherded her family of three sons and two daughters across Canada. After a tiresome four-day train ride from Ontario, they mounted the stage coach on its final run out of Edmonton. Boarding a scow at Athabasca Landing, they descended the Athabasca and Slave rivers to Fort Resolution on Great Slave Lake to become the first independent white family to settle in the N.W.T.

Frank, age 16 upon his arrival, quickly realized that trapping was the way of life in the North. He accompanied a seasoned Metis trapper, Frank Heron, and from him learned how to set traps, travel by dog team, and survive in the bush. By 1916 the Conibear family had built a house in Fort Smith and relocated. Frank established his own trapline on the Talston River, a line he gradually extended nearly 200 miles into the barrens. His harvests were abundant, and as he visited the traps on his long line during 32 years as a trapper, he walked and paddled roughly the equivalent of four times around the world. During that time he had ample opportunity to observe the habits of wild animals and to improve his trapping techniques. Conscientious at his craft, he also kept accurate records and made notes on his observations.

His summer activities were varied. He guided mineral and survey crews farther north, largely into the Great Bear Lake region. He joined, at the age of 20, one of the first group of Fire Rangers for the whole of the Northwest Territories and was appointed captain of their steamer, *The Hope*. And he became a river man and boat pilot as well, engaged in portaging, loading, and transporting goods to the far North while the rivers were navigable.

In 1923 he travelled to Rochester, Minnesota, for treatment of hearing problems. There he met and married Cecelia Powell and returned with her to Fort Smith to continue trapping. The Conibears had acquired property, and on it Frank built a hotel with a pool room and café, which he and Cecelia operated for over ten years.

Winters were still spent trapping, however, and as the price of mink pelts rose to a high of \$40 in 1928, Frank found that the loss of animals escaping from the leg-hold trap not only had drastic financial implications, but also was inhumane and disturbing, especially when he discovered, in some of his traps, a claw or leg that an animal had chewed off to escape a slow and agonizing death.



Frank Conibear at about 38, fleshing a beaver pelt. The pelts hanging behind him are fox.

What was needed was an improved trap, a humane one, that killed instantly. The trap had to be practical — easy to carry, light, compact, and inexpensive. After much thought, Conibear came up with an idea derived from the kitchen egg beater. "If a mink stepped into an egg beater and the handle was turned, it would be there to stay."

The first model, handmade by him in 1929, was cumbersome, although it showed promising results. This trap, designed to snap across the animal's chest and crush it, was not yet sufficiently powerful nor practical. The next model had a stronger spring but still needed improvement.

By 1935 the Conibears had five children. Fort Smith had no school, so Frank Conibear moved his family to Victoria, B.C., but he returned north to trap in the winters. Summers he spent working in Fort Smith or Victoria. In 1942 he sustained a severe back injury while on his trapline, and after treatment at the Mayo Clinic, he was forbidden to work. He left the North in 1944 and rejoined his family, where he began writing pamphlets and books based on his keen observations of forest animals. *Devil Dog* was modelled after one of his lead dogs. His best-known book is *The Wise One*, a story about the adventurous life of a black beaver, co-authored with J.L. Blundell and published in 1949. An abridged edition newly adapted and particularly suitable for young readers is now on the market.

Although he had turned author, Conibear had not forgotten his trap. After ten years he came up with an outstanding improvement, based on a pair of his mother's embroidery hoops. The model was square, constructed with spring-powered steel jaws that snapped with tremendous force over the neck or chest of the animal as it passed through the square hoops, resulting in instant death.

The Association for the Protection of Fur Bearing Animals financed the manufacture of 50 traps, and Eric Collier, President of The Trappers' Association of British Columbia, both supported their field testing and advocated them in *Outdoor Life*. Success at last — a trap that was light, could be built in various sizes, and could be set on land or in water. Frank contacted the Woodstream Corporation of Pennsylvania, and within a year the Victor-Conibear trap was on the market. To introduce this product, the Canadian Association of Humane Trapping, working with the Canadian Provincial Wild Life Services, encouraged trappers to exchange their leg-hold traps for the Conibears — free.

The trap became popular and recognition followed. In 1961 Frank Conibear was presented the first Certificate of Merit by the American Humane Association, acknowledging his achievement. In 1981 he shared a first prize of \$24,000 with two others for his ideas submitted to the Humane Trapping Committee, an award made by the B.C. Government for "outstanding creativity in the development of more humane animal traps."

In 1970, during Queen Elizabeth II's tour of the North, Frank Conibear was invited back to Fort Smith to meet Her Majesty in recognition of his outstanding contributions. Conibear Park, located in the center of Fort Smith, was created on land donated by the Conibears. It provides a pleasant, relaxing spot for travellers and local residents, and a large plaque honours the donor.

Now, in the autumn of 1983, Frank Conibear is a lean, distinguished-looking gentleman of 87 years, still residing in Victoria. Though widowed, he has the joy of his sons and daughters and their families to fill his life. He busies himself writing about his experiences and continues to ponder improvements on his trap, particularly to design one suitable for humane trapping of larger animals. Should this inspired man achieve his dream, he will bring us another step closer to eliminating cruelty from the centuries-old occupation of fur harvesting.

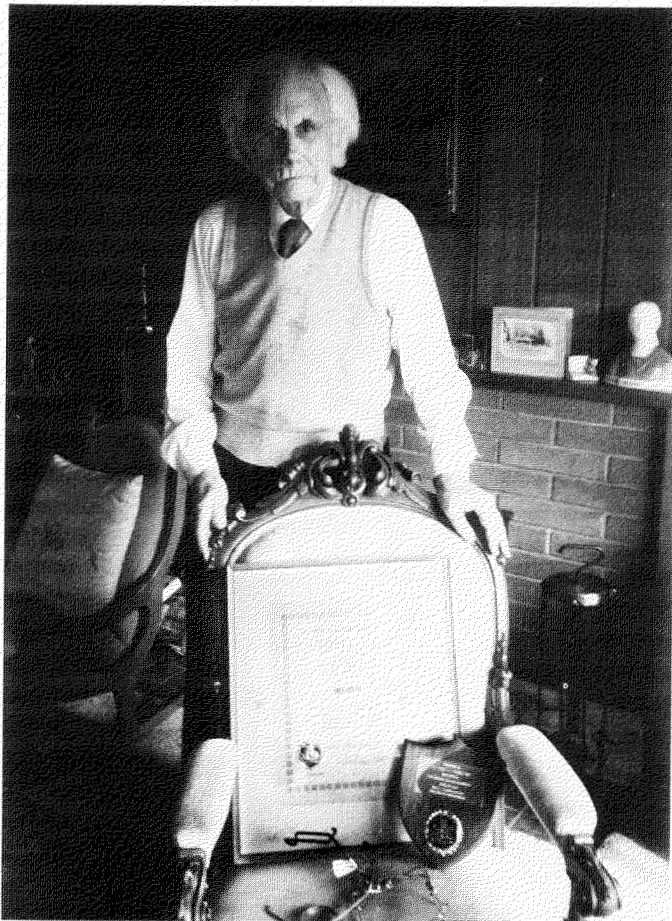


Photo courtesy of Slave River Journal, Fort Smith, N.W.T.

#### FURTHER READINGS

- BATEMAN, JAMES. 1971. *Animal Traps and Trapping*. Harrisburg, PA: Stackpole Books.  
 GILSVIK, BOB. 1976. *The Complete Book of Trapping*. Radnor, PA: Chilton Book Company.

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