

## FLORIDA FUR-FARMING.

BY J. M. WILLSON, JR.

In discussing the water products of Florida fur-farming is worthy of consideration. That Florida produces a fur of high grade will doubtless be a surprise to many, yet thousands of dollars' worth of otter skins are shipped from the State annually. As a subject for water-farming the American otter occupies a position distinct and wholly his own. Terrestrial and aquatic, he is an interesting anomaly.

From the beginning of time the skins of animals have contributed largely to the comfort of mankind. The first garments ever worn by the human race were made of skins and fashioned by the hand of the Creator. "Unto Adam also and to his wife did the Lord God make coats of skins, and clothed them." (Genesis iii, 21.) In latter days the employment of so much fur for personal adornment has led to the wanton destruction of the teeming millions of fur-bearing animals. From the constant reports of the work of the deadly pelagic sealers and the consequent extermination of the seal many questions arise and many theories are advanced as to the furs of the future.

Leading furriers in New York say that the price of furs during the past few years has advanced at least 150 per cent, and that the time is rapidly approaching when seal will be a luxury which only the very rich can procure. Either the sealing-grounds must be repleted or the future wearers of fine fur must pay fabulous prices for the privilege of being kept elegantly comfortable, or else they must resort to cheaper skins.

This is a scientific age and the domain of investigation is visibly broadening. The main idea of the majority of mankind seems to be to discover new fields for labor and investment, and the sequel to the "story of the seal-skin sack" is yet to be revealed.

The fur of the American otter ranks among high-priced furs, of which, too, any quantity can be sold, quotations on Florida otter skins (cased) ranging from \$5 to \$8 each. In anticipation of a coming deficiency in the supply of fine furs the subject of breeding the Florida otter for its fur has been investigated; and Florida, as the natural haunt of the little animal, offers a field for experiment. The subject bewilders, then fascinates.

The Florida otter is fast being exterminated; but in the swamps of the Everglades, where none but the daring hunter or the stealthy-footed Seminole wanders, the little animal is still found. Very little, if anything, of the habits of the otter is known to science. Every effort has been exhausted in attempts to collect useful data on the character of this quaint little denizen of the swamps. Scientific journals and the encyclopedias add little to the research. From the trapper and from the hunter, who in pursuit of their callings have observed the wary otter, the most valuable information has been gleaned.

Many objections have been raised by the incredulous as to the practicability of raising the otter for a pecuniary benefit, but each objection in its turn has been met. Neither the excessive rains nor the long droughts, the hot summer suns nor the frosts of winter, will affect the industry; neither would the products have to be rushed to market. The pelts, after casing, are non-perishable; the demand for the fur is greater than the supply, and a maximum price could always be obtained by the fur being taken only at its prime, while the transportation charges for conveying the product to market would be very small. In the manufactured garments the quotations on seal are only about 25 to 30 per cent higher than on the natural otter.

While the impression is abroad that the skins of southern animals have a decided disadvantage in the market as to quality, it is learned from leading New York furriers that the Florida otter compares favorably with the furs of more northern latitudes; and, further, that any quantity of Florida pelts may be sold in New York, and that even during the past depression in business otter fur held its own, which is the best proof of its stability.

The otter is most easily domesticated, having a marked degree of intelligence and acute perceptions; he is cunning and affectionate, and as playful as a kitten. In his native haunts he is one of the shyest of wild animals, but in the domain of civilization is bold, venturesome, and ever ready to make friends and foes alike. Few animals equal the otter in agility; his long, flexible body is enveloped in a skin so loose that he almost seems able to turn himself over in it; he can dart or turn in the water with as much celerity as a fish, and is therefore an expert swimmer. Small fish he eats in the water, while large ones he brings out on land to devour.

In raising the otter for his fur, every arrangement should be perfected to conform to the natural surroundings of the animal, the idea being simply to assist nature. Here in Florida the otter will grow and flourish with little or no attention. At the age of twelve months he is full-grown, and the fur is at its prime. The weight of a full-grown otter varies from 20 to 25 pounds. The female has young once a year, the number varying from three to five, although instances are known of eight young having been found with the mother.

It is confidently believed by those who have studied the subject, that the semi-domesticated otter, when well fed and cared for, will mature faster and rear a larger number of young than in a wild state. With the success attending the experiment of raising the otters which are now on exhibition at this Congress, the mind may quickly picture a ranch for this amphibious herd, both ideal and picturesque. The rich tropical foliage, the bird notes, and the dreamy southern sky are there; on the north shore of the large fresh-water lake are dense cypress forests; whitecaps play upon the waters; wild duck, crane, and quail are numerous. One side of the lake is covered with weeds and grasses reaching back and extending over a low, marshy ground, which is thickly dotted with clumps of bushes and cypress trees. The cypress knees, being very large and hollow, form ideal breeding-homes for the otter, which they enter by a passage underneath the surface of the water, forming a safe harbor and a secure retreat from all enemies. An abundance of food supply at small cost is an important point to be considered; and, after investigation, German carp has been decided upon as the most desirable fish for that purpose. In 1895, a supply of scale and leather carp was procured from the U. S. Fish Commission, and deposited in two fresh-water lakes, covering an area of about 60 acres.

While carp have recently been pronounced by the fish commissioners of several States an unmitigated nuisance, compared with which all the plagues of Egypt were but a mild chastisement, the very objection to the aquatic stranger—that it multiplies like some miserable species of insect—only adds to its value as a food supply for otter-farming. The otter being aquatic, his natural prey for the most part is found in the water—fish, frogs, snakes, etc. In his domesticated state he learns to eat almost anything—meat, cooked vegetables, fruits, bread, etc. Carp may be fed if necessary on different kinds of vegetables; thus between the carp and the otter all surplus crops could be utilized.

According to statistics, the young carp, with plenty of food, will attain the large growth of from 3 to 6 pounds in one year. Nature has supplied the food for carp in Florida waters in the greatest quantities; the water-lily, bonnet-pad, grasses, and tender roots, which European waters do not possess, abound in the lakes. The water hyacinth, which has become such a menace to navigation in the St. Johns River, if propagated in a carp pond, would supply food for all time to come. In order that the carp shall be provided with a variety of food, a quantity of wild rice (*Zizania aquatica*), may be sown around the edge of the lake and in the muddy bottoms. To clear the lake of alligators would be a necessary precaution; and with fish, turtle, etc., this aquatic herd of fur-bearing animals would grow and flourish.

The otter is a great climber, and, from the experience gathered from the study of the captive otter, it has been demonstrated that a particular kind of inclosure is required. The fence should be a combination of wire and plank, or a solid wall fence, set below the surface of the ground and extending beyond the lake on all sides. With a large inclosure (a space of 20 to 40 or 60 acres being desirable) conforming to the natural haunts of the animal, this aquatic herd need not feel their captivity, but fish and leap and play and rear their young as naturally as if they were in their Everglade haunts.

KISSIMMEE, FLORIDA.