

NIGHT HUNTING FOR COON

Tenth In A Series Of Articles On The 19th Century Photography Of Gerhard Gesell

Hunting wildlife in the 19th century was usually for food and trade. In the latter part of the 19th century rifles were generally single shot, breech-loaders. Firearms were much heavier than today and rifles had a much longer barrel. Raccoons were an excellent trade item with furriers and fur traders because their undercoat is about 90% dense fur ... an ideal material for outerwear and keeping warm in the cold winters of Wisconsin.

The North American raccoon, weight 8 to 20 lbs, is nocturnal so hunting coon would take place at night. Although raccoons thrived in sparsely wooded areas, they depended on vertical structures to climb when they felt threatened. They avoided open terrain and areas with high concentrations of beech trees because beech bark is too smooth to climb. Tree hollows in old oaks or other trees and rock crevices were preferred by raccoons as sleeping, winter and litter dens; they would also utilize burrows dug by other mammals, dense undergrowth or tree crotches.

Gerhard Gesell took the "Night Hunters" photo the morning after a successful coon hunt by Henry Herold (standing) and Jacob Gross. The photo shows the hunting partners with the tools needed for a successful coon hunt ... a hound, a rifle and a lantern. Gesell staged the scene to look like a night in the woods and displayed the fruits of the night's hunt. The original "Night Hunters" photo was donated to the Alma Historical Society in 1988 by Oscar Maier, Henry Herold's grandson.

Henry Herold was born in 1847 in Germany and farmed his earlier years in the Town of Belvidere near the Village of Herold. Henry was passionately fond of music and more so of the song as it was sung by the societies of his fatherland. He was a member of the Alma Frohsin Singing Society. Later in life he was a furrier and conducted a fur store and repair shop in Alma where he died in 1911. Today Gregory Noll, a 6th generation descendant of the Herold family, still hunts on the land.

Jacob Gross was born in 1838 in Germany and farmed most of his life in the Town of Alma. Jacob was one of those who helped to quell the Indian disturbances in the Dakota and Minnesota. He also was one of the defenders of New Ulm, Minnesota in 1863. He died in 1913.



Members of both families still live and hunt in the Alma area of Buffalo County but coon hunting is more difficult today because most of the recreational land is now posted as private property. Many of the current landowners wouldn't even consider letting you come through with a hound.

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Photo: Night Hunters (WHS Image 75499)