

# The Passing of the SEA-OTTER

BY FORBES LINDSAY



KARABELIN WATERFALL, COPPER ISLAND

Islands was from 2,000 to 4,000. From that period a steady decrease has brought it down to practically nothing and with the expiry of the industry has vanished the mainstay—almost the sole source of subsistence, in fact—of the Aleuts. The skins handled by the Alaskan company represented the largest proportion of the entire catch since 1870, except for the take of the Copper Island preserves. In 1873 the company purchased—in round numbers—2,500 sea-otter pelts; in 1878, 3,000; in 1883, 4,000; in 1888, 2,500. Since 1892, the figures have never reached 1,000, and in recent years have fallen far below 500.

The pelage of the sea-otter has always been one of the most highly prized of all furs. In a work published in 1780, it is stated: "Of all these furs (those secured by Russians in Asia and America) the skins of the sea-otters are the richest and most valuable. These animals resort in great numbers to the Aleutian and Fox islands, where they are called by the Russians, Booby Morak (Bohr Mor-ski) or sea beavers, on account of the resemblance of their fur to that of the common beaver." In the period of protection, preceding our purchase of the territory of Alaska, the average price of a sea-otter skin was \$50. With the ensuing decrease in the supply the market value rose by leaps and bounds. The ruling price in the London market of 1888 was \$100; in 1889 it was \$160; in 1891, \$220; in 1895, \$350; in 1898, \$500, with occasional purchases at much higher figures. Since 1900, single skins put up to auction have frequently fetched more than \$1,000, and in a few instances have sold as high as \$1,500. A prominent furrier recently remarked to the writer: "The sea-otter is fast becoming a rarity. In a few years the skins will sell entirely on commission for wealthy customers, just as a diamond merchant buys rare gems or a picture dealer a master-piece."

We have comparatively little exact knowledge of the sea-otter and its habits. The scattered descriptions in encyclopedias and other technical works are incomplete and often incorrect. The drawings of the animals are especially faulty, even that of Wolf (proceedings of the Zoological Society of London, 1865), which is the best, being open to criticism on account of its cat-like head. In former times the inaccessibility of its habitat militated against the acquisition of scientific knowledge regarding the animal. Stella's study of it was not superseded for more than a century. Its changed habits and ex-

cessive timidity have made the investigations of later-day scientists extremely difficult, and, as in the case of the fur-seal, all attempts to keep it in captivity have proved futile. It is not believed that anyone has succeeded in photographing a live sea-otter at close range. Stejneger, who spent several months on Copper Island, could not secure a more satisfactory picture with the camera than that of the dead animal here produced. Indeed, there are few well-mounted skins of the sea-otter in existence. One of the best is that in the National museum, for the photograph of which I am indebted to the courtesy of Charles D. Walcott, the secretary of the Smithsonian institution.

The sea-otter (*Enhydra lutris*) is at full growth about five feet in length, including some 10 inches of obtuse cylindrical tail. Its head resembles that of the sea-lion, but is less sharp and attenuated. Its black eyes have a rather fierce expression, unlike the mild look of the brown-eyed fur-seal. Its small forehead has five short, webbed toes. Its hind feet are similar to those of seals, being large, palmated "flippers, furry on both sides. The pelage consists of a beautiful, thick, soft undermat of deep brown, somewhat lighter near the skin and frosted with the silver tips of long, stiff hairs, which are generally removed when the otter is dressed. On the head and neck the fur bleaches to a gray color. The skin is so slack that the pelt of an animal that measured but four feet will readily stretch to six or more.

The sea-otter, unlike the other members of its family, does not feed on ordinary fish, but eats mussels, clams, crabs and sea-urchins. Its female resembles that of the fur-seal in having but one pup at a birth, but it does not breed with the same regularity.

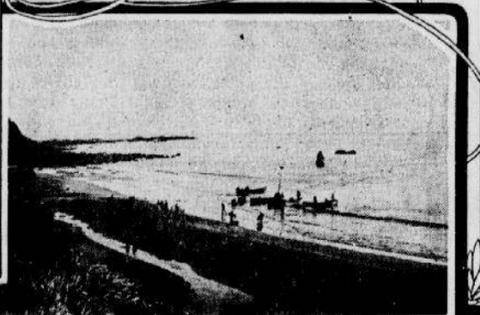
That the exercise of ordinary forethought on the part of our government might have saved the sea-otter from its impending extermination would seem to be proved by the experience of the Russian-American company and the example of the Copper Islanders, but it is probably now too late for the adoption of any effective measures of preservation. Even the herd on the Commander Island has decreased in the past few years, and it is not reasonable to believe that the sea-otter will there escape for long the fate that has everywhere else overtaken it.

The disappearance of this interesting creature will be the more deplorable from the fact that it is the only representative of its branch of the Enhydrids family.

C. H. FORBES-LINDSAY.



KARABELIN ROOKERY BEACH, WEST COAST COPPER ISLAND, BLACK DOTS ARE FUR SEAL



COPPER ISLAND GLINKA, EAST COAST



SEA OTTER ON THE BEACH



SPECIMEN IN THE NATIONAL MUSEUM PHOTO BY COURTESY OF SECRETARY SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION

THE sea-otter was first introduced to the knowledge of scientists through the investigations of Steller, the naturalist, to whose famous treatise, "Do Bestia Marinis," we owe the earliest descriptions of the sea-otter, the sea-lion, the fur-seal and the sea-otter.

Steller was a member of that last fatal expedition of Vitus Bering which discovered the Commander Islands. On November 4, 1741, (old style) the Saint Peter, returning from the discovery of the mainland of America, passed the southern extremity of Copper Island, and, on the following night, landed its survey-stricken crew upon Bering Island. On this repellent shore they were forced in the extremity of their sickness to abide for the winter, burrowing in holes like beasts and warding off the icy blasts with skins of the fur animals that abounded on that coast. When, at length, they effected their escape in a rickety craft, fashioned from the remnants of their wrecked vessel, they left 30 of their number and their dauntless commander buried beneath the shale of the island that bears his name.

Sea-otter were so numerous upon Bering Island at that time that they furnished food for the crew of 77 during the entire winter. On the return of the expedition to Kamchatka, in the spring of 1742, it carried back 700 or more of the beautiful skins of this animal and a keen demand at once arose. The promyshniks, utterly reckless of ultimate consequences, pursued and slaughtered the creatures, regardless of age or sex. Thus in 1745, Bassov and Trapeznikof secured 1,600 skins on Bering Island and in 1748 about 1,400 were taken. The result of this wholesale destruction was the practical extermination of the herd in a few years. Tolstikh's expedition obtained hardly more than 40 furs during the winter of 1754-55. In his account of the second expedition, made in the following season Tolstikh says that no sea-otters showed themselves that year.

There were by this time 25 or 30 Russian fur companies maintaining outfitting stations at the mouth of the

Amur, or on the shores of the Sea of Okotsk. Their vessels, searching for sea-otters, ranged eastward, and during the 25 years following the discovery of the Commander Islands, determined in quick succession the several links of the Aleutian chain, finally reaching the mainland of Alaska in 1788. It was in pursuit of the same object that Pribilof, 18 years later, came upon the group of islands to which he gave his name. The account of this discovery states that when the Russians first landed sea-otter "swarmed the shore of Saint George." It is doubtful if one of the animals has been seen on either of the Pribilofs in 40 years.

In the progress of this pursuit, the sea-otter was greedily slain without any restrictions, so that the yearly catch, which at first ran into the tens of thousands, quickly dwindled to hundreds. At the time of the first coming of the Russians the waters of Alaska fairly abounded in sea-otter. They were found in herds, distributed over an area extending to 28 degrees north latitude and embracing the western Kuriles and points on the Kamchatka coast.

About the close of the eighteenth century, the Russian-American company—the great competitor of the Hudson Bay company—was organized by imperial power and privileges. It was virtually in control of the territory, and as far as such a difficult matter could be contrived, exercised supervision over the hunters. A limitation was placed upon the hunters of animals that might be taken in a season and certain other rules of a protective character were laid down.

At that time the otters, following their natural habit, hauled out on land to feed, to rest and to sleep, and to feed on the shell fish and sea urchins exposed at low tide. Under the regulations of the company they were taken in nets, and clubbed, the use of firearms being prohibited. The females were spared, and the first lesson taught the young hunter, after he had learned to handle the kayak and cast the spear, was how to distinguish the

sexes in the water by the color and shape of the head and neck. When hunting on shore, care was taken to disturb the animals as little as possible. The sea-otter is exceedingly timid and readily deserts a locality in which alarming sights or sounds have been experienced.

The efforts of the American-Russian company to avert the threatened extermination of the valuable animal met with marked success. Twenty years of enforcement of intelligent regulations were followed by a distinct increase in the herds. Even upon Bering Island, whence, as we have seen, they had entirely disappeared before the end of the century, sea-otters returned in large numbers, so that "in 1827, no less than 200 otters were killed in one week at the reef near the present Nikolski village." But the revival was short-lived. After the transfer of Alaska to the United States the precaution instituted by the Russian company was relaxed and the old-time indiscriminate slaughter was resumed. The animals were shot on the shore as well as in the sea, and cod fisheries were established in the vicinity of their haunts. Hunting schooners visited the otter banks every season, and defiled the hauling grounds with camp fires and decaying carcasses.

Thus constantly harassed and driven from their customary resorts on the land, the sea-otter not only greatly diminished in numbers, but actually changed their habits. Forsaking the

hauling grounds which had been rendered untenable, or at least unattractive, they no longer came out on land to feed or rest, or to give birth to their young, but lived entirely in the water, resorting to the kelp beds for the functions of breeding. So pronounced is this change of habit that some writers have described the sea-otter as a strictly marine animal by nature, living entirely in the water, whereas, it is naturally no more so than the fur-seal which passes a considerable portion of each year on dry ground.

In the belief of the best authorities there is but one spot on the earth—that is Cooper Island—where the sea-otter may be found adhering to its natural habits and—says Stejneger—"there is no other place in the world where so many sea-otters can be seen at the present day." Careful management has there preserved the herd, so that from one to two hundred—a large catch under existing conditions—may be taken each year without detriment to it. The rookeries are constantly guarded against intrusion. Shooting or making fires in their vicinity are strictly prohibited. The method of taking the animals is restricted to nets and all females and yearlings caught alive are liberated. The extent of the season's catch is determined in advance by the administration and the hunt is conducted by the natives en masse under the direction and control of the chief. The Russian government buys all the skins at a fixed price and de-

livers a handsome revenue from the trade, whilst the income accruing to the Aleuts places them in a position of comparative affluence. Stejneger, writing 19 years ago and basing his opinion upon actual observations, said: "The animal, which is now nearing its extermination on all the American islands and shores, where it is not protected at all, is actually increasing on Cooper Island."

By refraining from resort to the land, the sea-otter rendered its capture more difficult and so prolonged its passing, but it could not escape its doom. With the diminution of its numbers the skin rose in value and the pursuit became closer, and, if possible, more ruthless. The "otter canoe" scoured the waters in which the creatures fed, and in breeding season descended upon the kelp beds in such numbers that the survival of a wretched remnant of the former herds is a subject of wonder. By nature gregarious, the animals have, in recent years, displayed a tendency to consort in couples and their timidity has long since increased to a point that made it impossible to approach them within spearing distance. The crews of canoes and schooners have depended upon the rifle for many years, with the result that, perhaps, one in every five killed has been secured, for, like the fur-seal, the sea-otter dives instantaneously upon being hit.

Between 1873 and 1882, the annual catch of the Indians of the Aleutian

## WIELDS "BIG STICK" ON INSTITUTE

SUPERINTENDENT OF CHICAGO PUBLIC SCHOOLS HITS ART INSTITUTION.

The "big stick's" miniature, ably wielded by the strenuous superintendent of Chicago schools, E. G. Cooley, now has descended upon the Art Institute. Its recent record having been second only to the big stick major, the teacher's federation, the "book trust," the Field museum, the advocates of the school, the best he had seen either here or abroad. Sir Purdon is director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and for 30 years was with the South Kensington museum in London. The Art Institute stands on its merits.

### HE WAS GENEROUS.

Master Walter, aged 5, had eaten the soft portion of his toast at breakfast and piled the crusts on his plate. "When I was a little boy," remarked his father, "I always ate the crusts of my toast."

"Did you like them?" asked the little boy, cheerfully.

"Yes," replied the parent.

"You may have these," replied Master Walter, pushing his plate across the table.—Delmeator.

A FAIR EXCHANGE.

Sillius—I never send a man on a fool's errand.

## IN THE THEATERS

Work on the new Harnois theater has made such excellent progress the past week that the completion of the handsome house is now in sight. The decorations are practically out of the way and the carpenters are following them up with the finishing work as rapidly as they can hustle. The handsome staircases are well along and as the work advances it becomes more and more evident that the Harnois theater is to be one of the handsomest playhouses to be found anywhere in the country. The rose and gold color-

When it is completed the public will feel amply repaid for the waiting.

"The Alaskan." That "The Alaskan" of this year is even better than the show that delighted a Missoula audience last season is evidenced by the following, taken from the Seattle Times of January 11:

"The Alaskan" returned last night to its home city and to the theater in which it was the opening attraction music was composed and whose production is owned in Seattle. It's a much better "Alaskan" company, on the whole, than the one which opened the Moore theater. There's a fine singing chorus, one of the best to be heard anywhere this season, and the dancing Eskimo girls in their fur parkies are the most original and effective "brollers" of them all.

"Billy" Fables, as the polar bear is this year, as last, one of the big hits of the piece; he provides at least nineteen-twentieths of the comedy, and saves many a scene.

The strong points of "The Alaskan" are the unusual beauty and quality of its music and the excellence of its lyrics. The real value of these verses got over the footlights last night in a way which was lacking when first they were heard.

Forrest Huff, who succeeds Harry Girard as "Dick" Atwater, "The Alaskan," has a barytone voice of much beauty and strength, and is an actor, besides. He made the part very real, and with his first song, "The Song of the Rifles," he captured his audience.

It is one of the best numbers in the piece and Mr. Huff sang it splendidly. Edward Harwood, who, as "Totem Pole Pete" was the feature of last year's cast, used his big bass voice with fine effect and his "Totem Pole" song with its chorus of animated "family trees" was again a tremendous hit, and was encored again and again. The soprano role of "Arlee" is filled this year by Lora Lieb, an extremely dainty and graceful little actress with a pretty voice. Her song numbers, which are by no means simple, were most effectively sung, the most popular of them being "A Party of the Second Part," "Rainbow and Thistle" with Mr. Huff and Mother Did," into which last she put a delightful bit of comedy. Fritz von Busing as "the Chaperon" was entirely adequate and sang her one song well. Several interpolated numbers have been introduced this year, the best of which is Mr. Martindell's "For I Dream of You."

Mr. Cort has staged the piece even more elaborately than last year, and the second act picture got a round of applause with the rising of the curtain.



FRITZIE VON BUSING, CONTRALTO PRIMA DONNA OF JOHN CORT'S FAMOUS COMIC OPERA, "THE ALASKAN."

plan, which has been developed throughout the interior is delightful; there is nothing glaring about the house anywhere, and the whole effect of the finish is so harmonious that it appeals at once to the beholder. The wisdom of Mr. Harnois' decision to thoroughly complete the house before he attempts to give the opening performance is apparent now. There is so much to be done and the work requires such nicety of calculation that it would have been fatal to the future of the house to hurry the work.

## NOTES OF SHANGVILLE

Special Correspondence. Shangville, Jan. 23.—The attention attracted by The Missoulian's kindly interest in our thriving little city has proved a boon to our real estate agents. Lots have doubled in value and at the present writing there is not a vacant house for rent in the town.

Shangville now has a population of over 250 and for the benefit of those who are contemplating taking up a residence in our midst it must be said, in justice to our fair city, that we have the best governed town in Montana. We have no saloons, no gambling dens, no dance halls and as far as can be ascertained our female population does not play bridge whist.

Some of our young city engineers have been taking frequent trips of late to Frenchtown on a velocipede

"Brewster's Millions." Predicated upon an impossible concept as it is, "Brewster's Millions" is, by the very reason of this fact effervescent with humorous situations.

There is more than the usual interest in the "six best sellers" of a few years ago, as it is likely that the show will open the new opera house. The Republican continues as follows: "The dramatization of George Barr McCutcheon's story of Winchell Smith and Byron Ongley is faithful and shows a keen power for the selection of incident and dialogue most valuable for the stage. It is especially strong in unusual situations, while the manner in which each is solved and the plot carried on is ingeniously laughable. The impossibility of the situations places Brewster's Millions in the category of farce rather than comedy, and character study is lacking.

Denver saw the production last year, presented no better than by this year's company. The yacht scene in the third act and storm at sea are done with realism and fine taste. The entrance of "Moony" Brewster in the first act, when the stage is darkened and he is silhouetted against the dim light of a window, is also a catchy piece of stagecraft. Brewster's office in the second act is hardly in keeping with the story, being rather a bare place for a man who is spending a million dollars in a year that he may inherit seven million more.

## ELECTRIC SIGNS

We Sell Them at Cost  
We Hang Them Free  
We Light Them at Cheap rates  
Let us submit designs and quotations for your sign.  
Missoula Light and Water Company

car. It is rumored that they are training for a Marathon race next spring. Other rumors as to the cause of their unthought activity are rife, but as they are unsubstantiated by facts, we are inclined to favor the Marathon theory.

A gymnasium club has been organized and some of the members have shown surprising talent in the boxing line. Should Jeffries adhere to his determination not to re-enter the fistic arena it is thought that J. C. King, our chief dispatcher, is the most logical opponent of Jack Johnson for the heavyweight honors. He is developing rapidly in the art and is following a strict course of training which consists of light boxing exercises and long cross-country runs. A few weeks of this kind of training and he will not only be hard to whip but hard to catch.

THE WORTH OF A WOMAN. Whatever the wage of the world may be At the close of the tolling day, For a task too slight for the world to see, As it measures men's work for pay, He is rich in the tribute of rarer land, That reckon world's wage above— In the touch of a woman who understands— In the thought of a woman's love, —Charlotte Louise Rudyard.

THUESON Western Hotel Building is fast becoming famous for his bargains in men's to-order-made, unclaimed suits and trousers. Have a look at them, and incidentally at the 1909 spring and summer suitings. They're hummers. The American Gentleman System of Tailoring.

FOR Wines, Liquors and Cigars For the holidays phone J. E. POWER Family Liqueur Store Corner Main and Woody MISSOULIAN WANT ADS BRING QUICK RESULTS.