

PALEFACE TRIBE ON RATTLESNAKE HUNT

Annual Event to Take Place Today When Enthusiasts Once Again Climb South Kent's Schaghticoke Mountain in Pursuit of Deadly Reptile

By Isabel Foster

CONNECTICUT'S mighty rattle-snake hunters start by automobile from Bridgeport early this morning for the dens of varmints, high on Schaghticoke Mountain in South Kent. They go protected by knee-high leather boots or leggings and armed with two-pronged eight foot sticks, gunnisacks [sic] and antidote.

Conspicuous among them will be Richard Howell, editor of the *Bridgeport Herald* and president of the Schaghticoke Rattlesnake Club, and Senator Charles E. Wheeler of Stratford, the club curator. When they cross the Housatonic, they will be met by other doughty hunters, including Frank Coggsell, an Indian living on the state reservation there, a veteran of the Spanish and World Wars and son of George Coggsell who fought in the Civil War.

The annual June hunt when the first hot sun brings the yellow and brown diamond backs out to bask on their ancestral ledges has become an occasion of state importance, starting in legend, winning national reknown [sic], subsiding before war and prohibition, but now reviving.

Popularity and prohibition almost killed it. The mortar and pestle used for mixing the famous sagwaw, indispensable [sic] antidote always served before, during and after the hunt was buried with ceremony long years ago. Now the club starts a soberer but not a less dangerous career.

"Dick" Howell Discovers Club.

It was "Dick" Howell who discovered it one bright spring day in 1903. He chanced when covering the damming of the Housatonic at Bull's Bridge to hear his escort "Dr." John Monroe call to George Coggsell as he was lying under a hemlock on the river's hank watching men provide power for the Waterbury trolleys, "Caught any rattlers Cogg?"

The reporter's ears pricked up, figuratively at least. He not only learned the whole story of the club which had been in existence for eight years but he received an invitation to attend a hunt with the club on the next fair Sunday. The secretary of the club met him with his camera and small suspicious package at South Kent station and as they bowled along the three miles to the river, behind the old black mare, he could not well have avoided the thought of Eden, so lovely was all the Maytime countryside.

"Going rattle-snake hunting, I see," was the cheerful greeting of every man they passed.

"Yes." "Dr." Monroe would answer. But that was unnecessary for there were two-pronged sticks, protruding from under the seat of the wagon. With such implements nothing else is done.

An Indian war whoop marked their arrival at the banks of the Housatonic. "Cogg," one of the few descendants of the Pequot and Mohegan tribes living

on the Schaghticoke Reservation, and president of the club was waiting there for them with his canoe. Once across, they divested themselves of hats and coats and watched "Cogg" put on his rubbers. Then came the climb, "Injun file," over a steep rocky path so slippery with dry leaves and pine needles that the legend grew that the snakes themselves oiled it for protection against the hunters. Sliding, falling, struggling, at last they reached the den, a quarter of a mile up.

If You Step on One, Stand Still.

Then came "Cogg's" warning, also to become a tradition—"If you step on a rattler, stand still, don't jump. He can't bite you if you stand on him, but look out for him if he gets loose."

"There was a rustling in the leaves." Howell wrote of this first adventure, "and I heard the 'pung' of the forked stick jab in the earth. Within three yards of me "Dr." Monroe had pinned a three foot rattler to a shelving rock where his rattleship had been sunning his glistening hide. The forked stick pinioned the serpent about five inches from his flat head. The pink mouth opened wide, the neck arched and then the head of the vicious snake darted like an arrow from the bow string at the merciless forked stick. You could hear the poisoned fangs hit the stick. Then the mottled brown body of the serpent writhed and coiled around the stick "

The men beat off the diamond head. In a year or two they had learned how-to preserve the reptile alive, a more dangerous and sportsmanlike procedure, or so they came to believe.

"Shang" Wheeler was the champion picker-up of rattlers, the curator of the club. It came to be a custom that as soon as a member had a snake beneath his stick he yelled, "I've got one. Shang."

The first time Wheeler did it, that was in 1905, the club was thunderstruck. On that occasion "Dr." Monroe had pinned a four foot rattler under his fork, and "the creature was lashing his head back and forth, his purple, long split tongue darting in and out between his fangs like lightning rushes in a black sky."

"We want him alive," said "Shang" Wheeler as he came up with his bag. "Now you hold him tight an'

I'll git him." Then he knelt and reached out a great brown hand.

Wheeler Picks One Up.

"For God's sake, man, you ain't going to take him alive in your hand," one of the city hunters exclaimed.

"Why not?" asked Wheeler. "That's the quickest, easiest way," and, so goes the report, "while the terrified city hunter was trying to get breath to expostulate further, that nery snake hunter had seized the rattler close behind the head with his right hand and was holding him at arm's length, while the snake's body quirked [sic] around his arm. Most of the snake hunters, including even the seasoned members from the Schaghticoke region, stood with blanched faces for a few seconds, until they saw that the snake was



"I've got one! Help!" The cry of the Schaghticoke Rattlesnake Club heard in Kent again today.

perfectly harmless if held tightly around the neck close up behind his head.”

Twice Mr. Wheeler came to grief in performing this dangerous office. The first time came later on that very day. When he picked one up by the back of the neck, perhaps he had grown a little careless, for he left the snake an inch or two of slack so that in a twinkling it twisted its head and stuck a fang into the middle knuckle of the index finger of Wheeler's hand.

“He's got me, boys,” said Wheeler, still holding fast to the snake. “Hold the bag, quick!” He dropped the rattler into it, then whipped out a knife from his pocket, cut all around the little red dot on the knuckle where the snake's fang had entered. He cut so deep that the bone was exposed. Then he lighted a match on the thigh of his trousers and held the wounded finger in the blaze of the match.

“It hurts like hell, boys,” he said, “but it's good medicine.”

Not a half hour later he was after the serpents again, this time with chloroform on a pad of cotton at the end of a stick. He was determined to find out whether the creatures could be captured by anaesthetics [sic].

Battling With a Snake.

“Wheeler crept up to within eight feet of the snake's head which was erect and waving back and forth. He shoved the cotton close. There was a whirr of the rattle and like a dart the flat yellow head shot back and then forward. The fangs struck the cotton pad and fastened in it. Wheeler jumped to his feet and twisted the stick so that the snake could not get his fangs disentangled. For perhaps half a minute the snake squirmed and lashed about, but there were half a dozen forks ready to pin him to the ground in case he freed his fangs from the cotton. In about a minute the muscles in the snake's neck began to relax. Then there was a visible relaxation of the muscles farther back and slowly but surely the entire body lay limp on the ground. But the tall did not lose its ability to wriggle and at times when touched gave forth a faint rattle.”

With nineteen snakes captured, six alive, the hunters now descended to “Cogg's” wigwam where they initiated new members. For this honor the tenderfoot had to take hold of a live rattlesnake back of his bead

and hold him while sagwaw was sprinkled on him and the oath administered.

When Mr. Wheeler was stung the second time, the club had reached its heyday. Fifty guests went up to Kent that May Sunday in 1907, mayors, aldermen, barkeepers, war correspondents, an undertaker, a doctor, several humorists and Pete Gruber, the rattlesnake king from Rochester, N. Y. A special car took the sportsmen from Bridgeport to South Kent where they were met by four big tally-ho coaches, each drawn by four horses. Antidote was served before the climb and after it more antidote as well as a snake chowder and a sheep roast.

Crowd Interfere with Hunting.

The crowd rather interfered with the hunting. Still eight rattlers were captured and one garter snake, by the way which was tied in a bowknot and put in Oliver Herford's pocket because he had pinned it to earth with his stick and called for aid.

It was Lindsay Denison, the magazine writer who caught the snake which stung Wheeler. Carelessness, that is what Wheeler calls it to this day. He misgauged the distance from the spot where he grabbed the snake to its head. It struck twice on the index finger of his right hand. Pete Gruber, it was this time, who whipped out a knife and cut out the poisoned flesh. He then sucked the wound clean of venom. Permanganate of potash was applied by the doctor and sagwaw by every friendly member who could come near. The hand swelled to the size of an eight ounce boxing glove but there were no other bad effects. The newspapers were full of the story—and no wonder, their star writers had all been present.

The numbers and the consequent expense of the hunt was getting too much for the club members. In 1909 tickets were issued at \$5 each, exclusive of transportation. Though the occasion was a great success, here began the end. The hunt had become a public affair—neither the number nor the quality of those who climbed Kent Mountain could any longer be controlled.

When Jim Pan died in the next year, the club all but died too. Jim Pan, the last full-blooded Indian on the reservation, was long the chief guide of the club. His burning eyes, hawk nose, fierce cheekbones and

imputable mouth, together with a wonderful gift for silence, made him a romantic figure. The white men gathered at Schaghticoke to do him honor and when they returned during the next season or two their pleasure was gone with him.

Jim Pan had a daughter, a lovely girl of 20, who was called by the snake hunters, Princess Alice-Sit-by-the-Fire-Water. But she too left the reservation, attracted by a paleface husband and the social life of Harlem. Another daughter became a trained nurse in New York.

The Indian's Son.

Jim left a son Howard who through his service in France his come to the notice of the club members. He was gassed and though working in Bridgeport now has never regained his health completely. On Memorial Day, 1925, the club went to the reservation to pay tribute to old Jim and then they voted to do all in their power to get this soldier son of his the right to come back to the mountain. The movement is still hanging fire for it is understood that Harris does not want to live in the country all the year as a ward of the state.

One snake hunt of the big days must not be overlooked because it occurred in January and on Broadway. It was the first taxicab hunt and was a great success—the Indians, Bridgeporters and all the countryfolk armed with forks and leggings were shown most startling things by the newspapermen.

But the stories that are told of snake-hunting must always be suspicious. "Dick" Howell started the club fashion in this line himself, way back in 1903, by describing a rattler's suicide which he said he himself observed on the first hunt he attended.

"A rattlesnake at bay is a sight that will never be forgotten. No one along the Schaghticoke range knows rattlesnake nature better than George Cogswell. He saw the opportunity to show me a rattlesnake at his worst.

"Watch him close," said 'Cogg,' and then he proceeded to tease the snake.

"They're a good bit like human beings," remarked the old snake hunter, as he rubbed the fork over the snake's head. 'Keep tormentin' a rattler and he'll commit suicide, just like some folks when they get in trouble and despair.'

"The rattler would seize the fork in his mouth and then, when some other fork prodded him in the back, he would loosen his fangs only to dart them at the last tormentor.

"Keep your eye on him now. He's getting desperate. Watch him kill himself, like a human. I've seen these devils do it many a time," said 'Cogg' as he continued to torment the rattler.

"Suddenly the rattle ceased.

"Now!" exclaimed 'Cogg'.

The Snake Kills Himself.

The snake quivered from his head to his rattle, a convulsive little quiver. The scaly skin drew over those glistening beads of eyes, the neck arched itself into an O, such a graceful curve, and then like a flash the diamond shaped head shot like a dart at the body and in a second the fangs of the rattler and dealt the blow that made him a suicide.

"And the tail of the rattler suicide did not wriggle when the body was touched like the tails of those we had killed.

"They never do," explained 'Cogg'. 'When they kill themselves they are dead all over and their tails don't wait till the sun sets back of the ridge before it dies.'

Cartoonists and humorists, all did their best. Frank O'Malley wrote one particularly gay account, based on resentment at being sent on a fifty mile automobile ride through the country, to drink good, sagwaw, eat good lamb, and motor home again through the spring twilight when the birds and his fellow snake-hunters were all singing.

O'Malley was never one of those "too fat to climb" but he could appreciate the feat. "The trail not only jumps right out of the west bank of the Housatonic but in places it leans backward. If you ever fell off it about half way from the top you'd drop into the middle of the river. . . . Whether or not the snakes do know, the fact remains that on the Saturday preceding the annual Sunday hunt the rattlers take a hand in making the climb to their den next door to impossible except for the very athletic. All day Saturday the rattlesnakes first roll around luxuriously in the pools of snake oil which the snakes keep in readiness in shallow pools on the ridge rocks and then they race up and down the

trail, whizzing the snake oil right and left, as they glide. The slippery dry leaves of the trail are bad enough. When wet with snake oil the climb is heartrending and every time your chest rubs against the trail just ahead of you, you get oil stains on your shirt front.”

A few years later, after publicity like this, the news reel men and rotogravure photographers far outnumbered the snakes to be seen, even after an hour or two of diligent hunting. The only thing which seemed to hold out before the increasing numbers was the sagwaw.

The Hunt Born of Legend.

With prohibition comes what seemed to be the end, but now there is hope that the hunt of the Schaghticokes may be perpetuated, as it ought to be. It was born of legend.

“Dick” Howell denies the connection, yet this is the history of the famous rattlesnake hunt of Schaghticoke Mountain, as it was recently told by Elliott Branson of the Stale Forestry Department, an authority on the Indian lore of Connecticut.

Not many years before the Revolution, the Schaghticoke tribe which had already been Christianized by the Moravians, was called out to protect their village from an hereditary enemy from the north, the Abenakis. With good fortune they overcame them in a battle and drove them all up Schaghticoke Mountain. For a week no sound or sight of the enemy reached the Schaghticokes, though they had a picket line around the entire base of the mountain. No war songs echoed through the gorges, no camp smoke stained the sky. Another week passed and suspicion grew that the enemy had escaped from the mountain. The young braves were growing restless, they wanted fighting or hunting, not this deadly watching and waiting. The council decided that the mountain must be thoroughly explored before they left their posts.

Cat Foot Climbs the Mountain.

At dawn the next morning, Cat Foot, the war chief of the Schaghticokes, climbed the mountain, his hand on his bow, his quiver plump with arrows. Stealthily he stole along the trail, letting no twig snap, no leaf rustle. As he drew near the top, he stopped in amazement for there he could see on a jutting rock

across a ravine. Fox Heart, the chief of the enemies, the feathers of his war bonnet streaming out behind, his eyes fixed on the village of the Schaghticokes in the peaceful valley below.

Swiftly and silently Cat Foot slipped an arrow into place. Whirr, it was gone— straight to the heart of his enemy. The body fell on a carpet of moss without a sound.

Cat Foot turned and thinking of getting the scalp made his way quickly round the head of the ravine and down to the rock where Fox Heart had stood. He pushed through the bushes and expected to see the fallen chief at his feet. All that met his eyes was the carcass of a dead rattlesnake.

Like a flash he slipped another arrow into place. On the instant he heard a rattle behind him and twirled about to see a young snake rising on its tail. It said in the tongue of his enemy:

“I am the son of the chief of my tribe. My race will remain to curse you forever.”

Before Cat Foot could shoot, the snake had vanished. He picked up the dead rattler to take with him as proof of his story.

For many years afterwards when spring came each year, the Schaghticokes went up the mountain to fight their enemy in the form of snakes. As time passed it was the descendants of both sides who fought. Finally when the new century came, the hunt was carried on by the palefaces themselves who knew not what they did but came with strong medicine, gunnissacks and feasting, to war against the ancient curse.