

# Two generations make a living off

By Peyton Fleming

WORTHINGTON — In our prohibitive world of increased automation, overbearing governments and family ties, 80-year old Guy Thrasher of South Worthington must be considered an eccentric.

From inside his wooden hut on Main Road, Thrasher has controlling interest in a variety of unusual occupations, all of which epitomize the romantic vision of 'self-employment'.

Fur trapping is Thrasher's primary profession. His secondary jobs are maple sugarer, fresh-water fisherman, flower salesman and ginseng collector.

"I like them all," said Thrasher, describing his multi-faceted lifestyle from inside his cozy wood-heated home and office where he has been living by himself since 1948.

Surrounded by hundreds of maple sugar cans, flower pots and piles of firewood, it is obvious that Thrasher's activities are directed by the seasons of the year, not by the century he is living in.

## Dismal Season

Talking to him in late April, the soft-spoken and affable lifetime resident of South Worthington immediately steers the conversation to the dismal sugaring season which for him was just ending.

"Didn't do too well this year," admitted Thrasher, indicating that his 900 taps produced a lowly 100 gallons of syrup compared to 300 gallons last year. "Guess they didn't do to well over your way (in Blandford) or up in Vermont either, did they?" he asked.

This year's poor sugaring results didn't bother Thrasher much though. One reason is that he chopped all of his own wood this year instead of paying \$1,000 for it.

"Had to give up a little bit of trapping this fall though," admitted the lifelong bachelor.

Just as Thrasher was about to move to another subject, his assistant of about six years, 24-year old Carol Myrick, walked into the room holding a six-inch rainbow trout that she had just caught across the street in the Westfield River.

The excitement of seeing this red-spotted reminder of a new trout season just around the corner is immediately apparent as Thrasher hops up from his wooden stoop next to the stove to inspect the wiggling

fish.

"She'll bring them in for the next two to three months for my supper," exhorts Thrasher gleefully. "She caught a nice 12-incher yesterday."

Myrick, who has also lived in the Worthington area

all of her life, has been working with Thrasher since she got out of high school about six years ago. "I didn't know anything till I started working with Guy," said Myrick, still holding the limp fish in her hand. "Never actually fished before, never knew anything



Carol Myrick and Guy Thrasher stand in front of Guy's Worthington home. (Photo by Peyton Fleming.)

## ie land in Worthington

about flowers and never even heard of ginseng."

Despite their 56-year age difference, Thrasher and Myrick are comrades that obviously work well together.

The first time the Myrick helped Thrasher out was about seven years ago with the vegetables and flowers that he sells from his stand each year beginning in May. Myrick learned so quickly that she is now in charge of buying all of the flowers down in Springfield and Connecticut, explained Thrasher. "Come in here on Mother's Day and this place will be full of them," he adds.

## Full-time Partner

A year or two later, Myrick said she started driving the truck for Thrasher when he was collecting sap, and after that, when he went out trapping.

She's been a full-timer ever since. "I like the change all of the time," explains Myrick, about her various apprenticeships. "You find that there is something different every day."

Myrick's apprenticeship in fur trapping began about four to five years ago.

Thrasher started 70 years ago back in 1910. "I realized I liked to do it the first time," said Thrasher, fondly referring to that first day when his father's brother-in-law took him out to trap muskrat.

"Used to trap from here (in Worthington) all of the way down to the Connecticut line and all of the way back up the eastern branch of the Westfield River until we'd end up just a little ways from the Vermont line," said Thrasher about the old days when he had a little bit more energy.

Thrasher felt that there was more money to be made trapping back then. "With wages at only \$4 a day, and us catching about four muskrats a day at \$16 to \$18 a pelt, we did pretty well."

Seventy years later, Thrasher is still catching the same animals — otter, mink, beaver, muskrat, raccoon and, occasionally, fox.

Last fall — the trapping season runs from November through February, the two partners used about 70 traps for an area that "covered 30 miles by truck" primarily in Worthington, Chesterfield and

hours.

Primarily, they use a steel-framed conibear trap that, Thrasher explains, "was invented by an old Canadian trapper years ago," but "which didn't become available here until 20 years ago."

For beaver and otter, they set the one-foot by one-foot square-shaped trap about eight-inches under the water "in their runways." All the animal has to do to set off the trap is rub their nose against the two thin wires that dangle from the top of the trap. "Kills a beaver as dead as a doornail," said Thrasher.

## Only 12 Beavers

Because "there were a few colonies that we couldn't even touch," said Thrasher, they only caught 12 beavers this year. One that was caught on Thanksgiving Day weighed 67 pounds. The pelt was sold for \$60. In the last five years they figured that they have caught about 225 beavers.

They also said that they only got one otter this past year.

For the smaller muskrat, Thrasher and Myrick use a four-inch by four-inch conibear trap. They are placed under the water around their holes in the banks. They didn't say how many they had caught this year, but indicated that they were selling them for about \$8 a pelt.

For raccoons, they use pocket-set traps that drown the animal instead of killing them instantly. Using either muskrat meat or fish for bait, they put the trap "about two feet under the water" along the banks of the river.

Thrasher said that they caught about 50 raccoons this year compared to "hardly any" the year before.

They were a bit disenchanted with the prices that were being paid for raccoon pelts this year though. This year they were selling for a lowly \$7 to \$25 a pelt compared to \$40 to \$50 a pelt last year.

"This year they were into short hair, last year it was long hair," explained Myrick, in reference to the preference of buyers from New York and Great Barrington that travel this area each spring.

The "long hairs" she referred to are raccoons. Beavers, considered "short-haired", were selling for \$50 to \$60 a pelt this year compared to \$5 for small ones and \$27 for large ones last year.

"It's all supply and demand," said Myrick, attempting to explain the tremendous fluctuations from year to year. "You never know whether to hold the pelts and wait, or to sell them right away. It's all a gamble."

Thrasher admitted that the money isn't as good in trapping as it used to be. "Make just enough money to survive off of it," he concluded.

Low prices aren't the only problem though. Thrasher feels that "the young people that are moving into the hill towns these days that don't want any animals killed," have hurt both the trappers and some of the animals species.

"They don't understand that what the trappers do every fall is reduce the fur population, and keep it under control," he noted.

Thrasher feels that the fox have been most adversely affected by the new restrictions on trapping. Until "five to six years ago," when land traps became illegal in Massachusetts, Thrasher said that he was catching "three to four fox a day." Now, he explains, there are so many fox "that they all end up dying because of mange," a skin disease.

Thrasher also believes that new laws that are meant to be for the animals benefit are actually more cruel. "Before, the fox hits a trap, gets a little hurt on his foot and then you knock him dead and it's all over with. Now, you see them staggering around because of mange, and they end up dying an awful death," said Thrasher.

Even though fox pelts were selling for \$70 to \$80 a piece this year, Thrasher said "that he didn't even try for any this fall because they are in such bad shape."

Although Thrasher admits that he doesn't trap as much as he used to — "it's a lot of walking out there, he said, he still loves to talk about it.

After a couple of hours of ambling conversation though it was obvious that Thrasher was getting itchy when his legs began to fidget and he started to play around with his red hunting hat.

Inquiring whether or not there were any more questions, Thrasher politely excused himself, and went outside to boil down the last few barrels of sap before it went bad.