Irene Journal Dec. 17-1944-
2 pictures

BITTEN BY A BUBONIC RAT

by

Irene Finley
Photographs by William L. Finley

Paging the Pied Piper! Paging the Pied Piper! It's no joke. We need him. We need somebody who can mesmerize - I should say paralize - that bold and certainly unwelcome intruder, the rat, any rat, as far as that goes, but especially that dangerous character, Rattus Norvegicus, the big brown fellow that Norway foisted upon us away back in the time of the Civil War. We have been working up wars ever since, and now we have got the most colossal and successful war - if you are talking backward - that the over fertile, or futile, brain of man has ever invented. Big ships and little ships, steel ships and wood ships, dirty ships and musty ships in uncounted thousands are plying back and forth from the old world day and night. This is duck soup for all the foreign animal, plant, and insect emigrants that use this free travel service to our shores, where there is more food and less killing. Ratticus Norvegicus is in his element, and he will probably land in every port and pier in our country. He has already penetrated into some of our inland waterways, and even further into far interior spots. It's an invasion.

The farmer of our family came in one day not so long ago holding up the little wire bird cage with an automatic trap door that is used for catching and banding birds of our dooryard, then releasing them. In the cage was a big, brownish-gray rat with a bare, scaly tail as long as the rest of him, and fierce, dark eyes. We knew this big fellow had been living along our river bank, and we had caught him sneaking up around the garbage pit and the chicken yard. He was always cagy and elusive, too smart to be caught with poisoned food. But inside this innocent little wire gadget was good, clean grain, not even the smell of a human hand on it. In he went and the little door dropped down behind him. He was afraid, his eyes were popping with a lurid red shine in them. He was caught at last.

We had been carelessly indifferent for a number of years to the presence of this big rat about our place. We called him a wharf rat and let it go at that. We had not been interested in him as a camera subject, because rats, snakes, and such like had always been taboo on the lecture program because they brought squeals from women patrons and sometimes a protest to the lecture management. The war fixed that, too, for traveling for lectures and even camera equipment are out. So we do a little photographing and kodachrome work about the dooryard, the birds that are home folks and always ready to exchange a picture for a handout, the little garter snakes sunning on the study steps and don't mind being carried around in a pocket, the big hop toad of the cabbage patch that will take a fly from a toothpick. So we decided - or the farmer did - that we would take the nasty rat's picture and enroll him in the list of films in the cabinet.

He put a heavy glove on one hand, for one hand was all that would go into the small cage door, reached in carefully - so he thought - and tried to get a good hold of the rat's body. As quick as a greased pig it slipped out of his fingers and squirmed out of reach from one corner to another. He finally got it out and carelessly didn't put on his other glove. Instantly the rat sunk his teeth into the palm of his bare hand, cutting deep. The blood ran, the man swore, and shoved the little villain back into his cell. I got camphor and soaked the wound thoroughly, then put on a Red Cross adhesive band. This time, both of us put on gloves.

We took the fiery rat out and held him quietly, letting him get used to things, and after squirming and trying to twist our of our hands, he finally settled down. But it took quite a bit of rebelling and biting at the tough gloves to get it into his head that this wasn't a prize fight. We didn't tell him that he was going to lose anyway. Before we got through, we had four or five snaps. But he wasn't a good subject, for every time the camera clicked he jerked involuntarily, which meant a blurred picture. The thought of a bubonic rat in our hands never entered our heads.

The family of rats and mice is the largest among mammals. One

scientist describes them as "a feeble folk, comparatively insignificant in size and strength, holding their own legions against a host of natural enemies, rapacious beasts and birds." Feeble folk, oh yes. Supposedly natives of Asia, they became world travelers, arriving in North America in 1775, and probably came to Oregon in ships in the early part of the last century. A specimen was collected at Astoria in 1855. At the present time they are common all along the coast country of the State, throughout the Willamette Valley, and in the Columbia Valley. Jewett reported them near the mouth of the Deschutes in 1915 as a serious pest in the grain warehouses. Within the last three or four years, they have been found in several inland regions of eastern Oregon, and in one region bubonic plague was reported, but whether from rats was not authenticated.

Wharf rats, as most people call them, usually enter a new region on vessels or railway trains and then spread rapidly from place to place, concealed in boxes, crates, or household goods on trains or freight trucks, or for short distances on foot. They are secretive animals, keeping much under cover or in burrows that they dig in banks or under buildings, rocks or logs. They travel mostly at night, but they are often active in day time as well as in the dark. They prefer the filth of stables, manure heaps, garbage and trash piles where they can revel in decaying food. They swim well and haunt the wharves and sewer pipes, thence into markets, cellars, if these are not rat-proofed with concrete or metal.

This rat is a prolific breeder, having usually six or eight young, but occasionally fifteen or twenty in a litter. The period of gestation is twenty-one days, and many litters are produced throughout the year. There is hardly any food product that they will not eat, and they are filthy and wasteful, often destroying more than they eat. They kill and eat chickens or any young animals they can get, and even gnaw the feet and injure many kinds of livestock. Rats have been called the most destructive of animal pests, not only destroying more food and property than any other animal, but being responsible for the death of more human beings than all the wars

of history. They are the hosts of fleas, ticks, and other parasites that carry the germs of disease including bubonic plague and other fatal maladies.

The black rat and roof rat, two smaller species than the brown rat, were once natives of Oregon, but have largely disappeared before the savage brown rat. Both of these latter species nest in trees, thatched roofs, or any place that is inaccessible to the big brown rat. In other ways, they are similar in habits.

No, we didn't tell the big, fierce rat that he was going to lose the fight. We sent him to the happy hunting ground as mercifully as we could, then offered him to Stanley Jewett for identification. He accepted the specimen with thanks, and definitely pronounced him to be a Rattus Norvegicus, in numerous instances bearer of bubonic plague. What a risk with death a simple minded farmer-photographer can take and go on whistling blithely on his way. Oh well, it isn't the first time he has done it.