

“God Bless dee Mushrat: She’s a Fish!”

by Dennis M. Au

Muskrat: nearly 300 years of French presence in southeastern Michigan has boiled down to an enduring passion for eating this little rodent. From Port Huron in the north down to the western shore of Lake Erie into Ohio, the descendants of Michigan’s 18th century French community are dubbed “Mushrat” French. This foodway is a trait that in part distinguishes them as a unique cultural group. The taste for muskrat has proved to be pervasive and has spread to other groups. The Poles and the Germans have adopted it, and in this century, public muskrat dinners sponsored by churches and clubs have become popular annual rituals.

Exactly how and when this love affair with muskrat — always pronounced “mushrat” — began is not clear. It is assumed the skill for cooking it was learned from the Indians by the *voyageur* ancestors of these Frenchmen. Muskrat was certainly a feature of life here in the 18th century, and by the 19th century it had become a sharply defined tradition. Muskrat was, and to a degree still is an important source of winter food and income for the French farmers and fishermen who live near rivers and marshes.

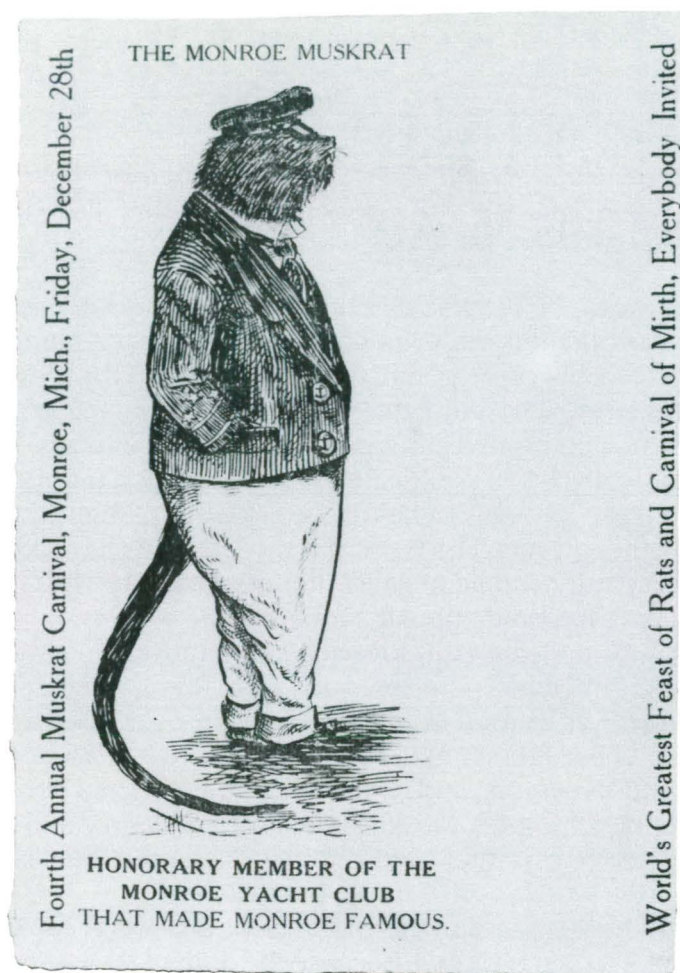
Through the years and to this day, many outsiders consider consuming muskrat repulsive because the animal has been tagged a rat. The response to this stigma has developed into a stereotypical dialogue. A recent convert to the delicacy stated, “The thing that convinced me was that the muskrat is a clean animal . . . [because] it only eats roots and things . . . It’s much cleaner than a chicken.”

The preparation of muskrat is carefully prescribed. The animal must be trapped before the first warm snap in late winter because his flesh becomes too gamy in the breeding season. After it is skinned and gutted, the fat and musk glands are removed. Removing these glands, which are said to number from two to seven, is considered essential. Failure to do this will result in foul tasting meat. Cleaned, the carcass is parboiled in onion and celery until tender. In the French homes the meat is next browned in a skillet or smothered in onions and roasted. At the public dinners, however, the rats are placed into large roasters and covered with creamed corn and butter. Among the older generation of Mushrat French, the head is the real delicacy. Family members vie for the chance to eat the brain and tongue. Some people are also known to make a form of *bouillabaisse* from the heads.

Indeed, for the French of southeastern Michigan, this peculiar foodway is what sets them apart from the continental French and the *Québécois*. The Mushrat French identify with the animal. Some serve it at holiday gatherings. Those who leave the area specifically request it when they return home, and a few have it mailed to them. The rodent’s name is even invoked in their terms of endearment. Although now falling from use, friends greet each other with,

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The Monroe Muskrat, pictured in a handbill for the 1905 Grand Muskrat Carnival. Photo by Dennis Au, courtesy Monroe Historical Commission Archives



“*Comma ça va*, you mushrat you!” Last but not least, muskrat lovers fondly recite numerous variants of Mushrat French. In one dialect joke reflecting French inverted word order, a man, when asked about his father, responds: “Forty-two mushrat kill’a my fadder!” “Oh, your father’s dead?” “No, damn fool! Mushrat dead!”

The most deeply ingrained tradition associated with the muskrat, though, revolves around the Catholic Church’s meatless fasts. It is widely believed by the Mushrat French and others that the people of this area were granted a special dispensation from the Church declaring the muskrat a fish, thus permitting its consumption on days of abstinence. The origin of this is uncertain. Some say it was done because of the animal’s aquatic nature. Others cite stories of a priest’s petition to the bishop or Pope to grant this favor to alleviate the suffering and starvation wrought here by the War of 1812 or, as the updated versions have it, the Great Depression. The muskrat being eaten as fish can also be documented along the St. Lawrence in the days of New France and as a practice of the *voyageurs*, the cultural predecessors of the Mushrat French.

No matter what its origins, the people are confirmed in this belief. Some were even taught it by the priest and nuns of their parish. Many people, “not wanting to miss out on meat,” make it a point to have muskrat on fast days. One family has made a mock ceremony of this. When muskrat is served, the head of this household raises his arms above the cooked rodent and assuming a



prayerful attitude declares, “God bless dee mushrat: she’s a fish,” in a humorous portrayal of the English spoken by the Mushrat French.

This belief is controversial. On the day after Ash Wednesday this year, a newspaper article brought the custom to the attention of the archbishop of Detroit. Appalled that a priest would affirm the legendary dispensation and puzzled by the members of his flock eating muskrat as fish, the archbishop announced the practice was to cease. People are incensed. On this issue they consider the archbishop ignorant, and they think him to be an interloper who has no appreciation for their tradition.

Outside the French families muskrat has another important manifestation. Beginning in 1902, a rage for public muskrat dinners developed, particularly in Monroe County in the extreme southeastern corner of the state. These dinners are annual winter fundraisers for churches, sports clubs, and lodges. The best dinners sell out weeks in advance. Local politicians and socialites make it a point to be seen at these affairs.

The public dinners have one curious aspect. From the first, male/female boundaries have been drawn. Women are only invited to those dinners that offer an alternative to muskrat — usually beef; the stag dinners have no option but muskrat. Outside the confines of the French homes, the meat is perceived as a male preference.

This past spring, the future of these public dinners was placed in doubt. The Michigan Department of Agriculture, which for years

Norbert “Nub” Hoffman and George Kausler at the Monroe Boat Club “muskrat cleaning bee.”
Photo by Dennis Au

Muskrat sign at Maveal’s Butcher Shop, Monroe, Michigan. Photo by Dennis Au

had overlooked muskrat in its official inspections, suddenly banned its sale and public consumption. That action raised a hue and cry. In Monroe County a rally and petition drive was organized. Just as if apple pie were being attacked, politicians in the county lined up behind the muskrat and accused state regulators of tampering with a sacred heritage. One state legislator, who incidently had patronized six of the dinners last winter, is determined to prevail over the agriculture department even if he must propose special legislation.

No matter what happens with the public dinners, the Mushrat French will find a way to get the little animal on their table. This link with their heritage is considered too important. While other aspects of their French culture may fade, this one continues with vitality. The Mushrat French dialect is largely relegated to memory; tales of the *Loup Garou* and *Lutin* can barely be recalled, and now only grandma makes *tourtiere* and *glissants*, but the taste for muskrat and the skill to cook it is passed on to the younger generation. After nearly 300 years the muskrat tradition is the living legacy and cultural contribution of the French in southeastern Michigan.

Suggested reading

Au, Dennis M. and Joanna N. Borde. "A Legacy from New France: The French-Canadian Community of Monroe County, Michigan." In *A Michigan Folklife Reader*. Michigan State University Press, forthcoming.

Hamlin, Marie Caroline Watson. *Legends of le Detroit*. Detroit: Gale Research Company, 1977 [Detroit: Thordike Nourse, 1884].

Lantz, David E. *The Muskrat*. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Farmer's Bulletin #396. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1910.