

# Following in the trapping tradition

By Charlene Peck

Two sets of footprints trail away from snowmobile tracks in the snowy back country of Jack Johnson's trapline near Blackstone Lake.

One reflects a shaky, yet purposeful gait of worn boots, seasoned with experience – imbedded footprints – so familiar to the territory, they almost blend in as part of the landscape.

A second crisp, new set, skips across the snow, as if created with the spirited eagerness of a yearling, leaving traces of boots, yet to be broken in.

They tell the story of 79-year-old area trapper Jack Johnson, who is mentoring newly licensed 16-year-old Shaun Morrissey, with intentions of one day, handing him the rights to his 9,600 acre trapline.

Lately, that familiar trek along the Healey Lake Road/Blackstone Lake trapline hasn't been the easy jaunt it once was for Mr. Johnson, who has had the line for the past seven years.

"These legs of mine can't take it any more," he says.

Retirement plans are on the horizon, but not before he passes on some pointers to that newcomer following in his footsteps.

When Jack first learned of Shaun's interest in trapping, he encouraged him to take the Ontario Fur Managers' Trapper Education Course offered last March. This 40-hour course comprises two full weekends of in-class instruction, plus a Saturday of

hands-on practical application in the field. In the meantime, Jack had begun mentoring Shaun, taking him out on the trapline.

"It's hard to explain," he says. "One has to be right in there hands-on. That's the best lesson."

Although an unusual pursuit for a Parry Sound High School teenager, Shaun relishes being outside all day. He doesn't mind the hard work, often finding it satisfying at the end of the day.

"It's like fishing," he says. "If you get one on, it's fun pulling it in."

In fact, those who know Shaun as a kid truly in his element fishing and hunting, weren't at all surprised when he took an interest in trapping.

"They knew it was natural for me," he says.

It wasn't long before Mr. Johnson spotted Shaun's potential. After all these years, you get to know the signs, the veteran trapper surmises. Traits like intuition, respect for humane trapping, determination, and an eagerness, are the kind of qualities he'd seek in a trapper he'd like to transfer his trapline to.

"So many people will stand back and watch you shovel snow, and chip ice. Not him. He pitched right in, he was the first with the ice chisel and the snow shovel. And I said there's a good trapper, so I kept him coming out as much as I could," recalls Mr. Johnson. "He has an eagerness to get the furbearers he's after, which means you've got to understand the animals. You're pitting your brains against them and they live there."

The experienced trapper saw a reflection of himself in his young protégé.

"I recognized some things from my own early days – I started going out with my father when I was eight years of age," he says. "Back then, you trapped to try to make a living

because in the winter time my dad was laid off from the railway until the spring again. You tried to make a buck the best way you could. In those days, a beaver pelt was worth \$20, and you could feed the family for half the winter on that."

He accompanied his father trapping near the Brignall CPR flag station, 10 miles north of MacTier. After a while, keen young Jack started setting his own trap in a marshy area close to the family home, and managed to get a couple of muskrats.

Even getting his hand caught in the now outdated stop-loss trap, didn't deter this trapper-in-training. He can still visualize his mother frantically wrenching the jaws of the trap to free his hand, and later, hearing her sternly eliciting a promise from his dad to 'never give that trap back to Jack'.

Good to his word, his father never did give that trap back to Jack.

"But a couple of days later, he told me where it was," chuckles Mr. Johnson. "So I started trapping again and mother didn't know."

It was the beginning of his life-long passion for trapping.

In fact, "outfoxing the fox", as he calls it, remained the one constant in his life, as Jack passed through a long series of jobs including CN roadmaster, Parry Sound Sunoco station owner, and heavy equipment operator/firefighting and training manager with the Ministry of Natural Resources (MNR).

Even before retiring from the Ministry in 1989, Mr. Johnson used his holidays and sick time to teach trapping courses for the Ontario Fur Managers' Association. He began leading courses in 1975, sharing information not only with those interested in trapping, but with animal lovers, curious about the fur management process.

"I've had a lot of people take the course, just to see what it's all about. Some of them are anti-trappers to begin with, who say you shouldn't do this, and after the course, say they've had their eyes opened," says Mr. Johnson. "And you'd be surprised, too, at the number of women who take the course and are proficient trappers."

The Fur Harvest, Fur Management and Conservation course offers more than

