

Sterling Fur Company

Like many trappers in Ohio in the 60's, Keith Winkler, at the age of ten, started out pursuing muskrats on the family farm, with the help and encouragement of his dad. Since the creek went on to the neighbors, eventually so did the trapline, and the water sets soon yielded raccoon and mink as well. Another lifelong love affair with trapping began. The old farm milk house became a fur shed.

"My dad was very instrumental in my trapping," said Keith. "He was also always very supportive in my business and also worked for me over the years until he could not. My dad passed away in July 2010." When he graduated from high school in 1974, Keith went to work in the parts department for the local farm machinery store in Wooster, Ohio. Inventory management was a skill he was learning that would help tremendously in the years to come.

"In 1976 I went to the Kenton coon dog trials in Kenton, Ohio and met up with some other trappers. The year 1976 was a big year for me," said Keith, "as it was the year, which was the first time I ventured out of the state of Ohio."

In 1977 the Sterling Fur Company was born. Named for the small town just down the country road, it occupied a portion of the farm's machinery shed. Since space was already being used as a fur shed, only minimal expansion was needed. Dad agreed that one bay of the building would not be missed by the farming operation. Little did the family realize how this would turn out! Keith kept his day job at the parts department.

In the winter of 1978, the fledgling fur and trap supply business attracted a neighbor of Keith's aunt and uncle, who was also interested in trapping. Tom Miller started hanging around and Keith finally asked him if he could help put up fur. His first task consisted of taking opossum home to put up! Tom became the opossum specialist! "You got to let them get cool and scrape them very slowly", said Tom. "That helps to keep the hair from falling out." Tom is now a permanent fixture at Sterling Fur and traps with Keith and helps at conventions. You may know him by his nickname, Humphrey. (More on that, later!)

"When I started the business in 1977, I was not even aware of the various trapping associations and trapping conventions," said Keith. "The first NTA trappers' convention I went to was in 1980 in Rutland, Vt. The following summer I quit my job at the farm machinery store and have been full time with Sterling Fur Co. ever since."

Keith is a lot more familiar with conventions and associations now; attending an average of ten conventions and two trap collectors meets a year. He has donated an enormous amount of goods and supplies to OSTA, NTA, FTA, and many other state associations, for their conventions and other functions. He recently started a campaign to help promote membership in the NTA. With every \$100 mail order, he sends a \$30 gift card redeemable for one new NTA membership, or two junior memberships. Keith understands that to preserve trapping in the US, strong state and national associations are crucial, and gladly support them and their missions.

In the early 1980's, as Keith advertised in more trapping magazines and became a familiar face at more conventions, the business continued to grow. More of the machinery shed became warehouse space and an addition, the first of many, was added. Keith knew that by buying supplies in large quantities, he could keep costs down and offer a better price to trappers, but that required more warehouse space. As the farms livestock operation was downsized, he was able to convert those buildings to storage and the bulk purchase expanded. He began to sell supplies to other dealers, who could buy from him cheaper than they could direct in the smaller quantities they needed. Wholesale began replacing retail sales at Sterling Fur Company.

In the late 1980's, Keith entered into a partnership with Ed Molnar of Northern Sport Company to buy fur and market lures. (See article, Northern Sport Company, in Buckeye Trapper, September-October 2011.) Jointly they bought out the Helfrich lure formulas and the Don Nicely lure formulas and books. They would often go on the road together to buy fur from other dealers. It was on one of these ventures that a nickname was born. "We were at a restaurant and bar near the motel where we were staying," explained Tom (Humphrey) Miller. "Uncle Ed (Tom's nickname for Molnar) saw these two sisters playing pool, and started teasing me about them. Said I should check them out. They were kind of big, so he referred to them as 'Humphreys.' This went on for a while, and finally Uncle Ed looked at me and said ' I guess we got our own Humphrey right here.' The name stuck." He has forever since been Humphrey. According to Keith, even Tom's family calls him Humphrey. Humphrey says he has met a lot of nice people across the US, although the conventions can be stressful. He still enjoys water trapping for rats and coon with Keith.

The late 1980's and early 1990's saw a lot of trap supply dealers and lure makers get out of the business, either due to the downturn of the fur market or through retirement. But while many were quitting, Sterling Fur Company was growing, and acquisition played a large role in that expansion. When Necina Outfitters closed their doors, Sterling bought out their inventory along with the Ultimate Coon Lure and the beaver hoop patent. The FC Taylor Company was purchased and the Verleen Trapper Supply Company of KS. "We worked closely with

Berkshire Company of Massachusetts,” according to Keith, “and bought out his manufacturing business in the mid 1990’s. We also bought out Russ Carman’s books in the 1990’s and became his exclusive distributor for his lures.” All that expansion meant more room was needed on the farm for warehouse space. Converting existing structures, additions and construction of new buildings was an ongoing process that continues today. As we toured the facilities, I asked Keith how many had been done over the years. He stopped, stared into the distance a while, and said, “I really don’t know.” One building holds nothing but pallets of jars. Parked semi-trailers store only books. The attic of the main barn has piles of hip boots and pack baskets. Cousin Tim Winkler is in charge of the pack basket company, acquired five years ago. Speed Dip was bought last year and now occupies a corner of another building. I asked, “How do you keep track of everything?” Keith replied, “I have three full time employees, four part time, and two sub contract people. Robert and Tanya remember where everything is.”

The original bank barn on the farm held hay, straw and beef cattle until five years ago. Now the lower level holds merchandise and the upper portion has been renovated with natural wood paneling to create Keith’s trappers museum. One section holds his antique trap collection. “I became interested in collecting traps in the early 1990’s,” said Keith. “I still attend the trap collector meets in Sidney, Ohio and Orwell, Pennsylvania each year. We host tours for school kids here where they can have a hands on experience with traps.”

Throughout the business expansion, Keith’s dad was very supportive. When Keith married his wife, Regina, in 1991, they moved to a brick house nearby. But by 1993, Dad decided to downsize the livestock farming and Keith and his parents traded houses. His dad retired from farming three years ago and passed away last year. I asked Keith who influenced him in the fur trade. “John Eby of Pennsylvania helped me get established,” he stated. “And being around the right people, like Russ Carman and Ed Molnar, who set high moral standards, helped. I try to do business the old fashioned way, with a handshake.”

The business continues to change. As more items have been added, inventory control has gotten more complicated. Summer sales have increased. More items come from places such as China, although Keith still purchases as much as he can locally. Until recently, Sterling Fur Company had no web site. All retail orders are placed by phone or e mail.

“I’ve seen a lot of dealers come and go. And many didn’t survive,” observed Keith. “I hope we can continue with realistic laws to own traps and trap.”

As I toured the farmstead with Keith, I noticed one out building had not been changed. The old milk house was still as it was when that grade school kid used it to skin muskrats, caught with the help of his dad.



