

Batting Rats

By Martha Alice Powell

Remember the Olympia Beer commercial that boasted of “the water”? The water at my parent’s house was some of that really good water. It came from a deep well next to the farmhouse. The building housing the pump was fondly called — the cellar. There were four steep steps that lead down into the cool, damp pump house. It doubled as a pantry for canned goods and storage for kitchen supplies and sports equipment. The floor and the walls halfway up were cement. Directly opposite the door was a huge chest freezer for venison, beef, lamb and frozen garden vegetables. Shelves for pantry goods lined the two side walls clear to the ceiling. There was just one small window above the freezer.

My older sister, Susan, was afraid of the dark, so mom was forever sending me to the cellar to get a jar of pickles, a package of frozen zucchini or lamb chops. It was my job to return things back to their rightful place. Everything, of course, had a rightful place. The tin wash pans hung on a specific nail on the wall. The skis were leaned up next to the ice skates, which hung next to the dried flowers. The picnic baskets and coolers were under the gallon jars used for buckaroo beans and sun-tea. It was always a point of pride when we sat down to a meal where everything was home grown and my ever practical grandmother would say; “We’re living off the land tonight”.

One summer, a wood rat moved into the cellar. My mom had stocked up on paper towels, paper plates, Kleenex and napkins. The wood rat helped himself to the paper supplies and tore them to shreds. He made himself a large and very luxurious nest on the top shelf of mom’s otherwise well organized cellar. Mom called the extension service to see if we should expect babies. But they assured her that a male rat would go to the trouble of making such an extravagant home all for himself. Mr. wood rat did not stop at the nest, however; he chewed the wax out of the jam and jelly jars, and threw all manner of things off the shelves and caused complete destruction in the cellar and total anguish to my mother.

My father, an independent eastern Oregon rancher, was not easily daunted by domestic challenges. He went to work to conquer the intruder. He battled the critter with a live trap, a box trap and One Bite. Nothing worked. He consulted the encyclopedia for “wood rat” and found the Desert Wood Rat, *Neotoma lepida*,

“Wood rats, commonly called Pack Rats or Trade Rats because they collect various objects and bits of material... (to use) in the construction of their nests are especially fond of small, bright, shiny objects, which they will readily confiscate.

They are widely distributed throughout all of North America, particularly in the west. They belong to the family Cricetidae (order Rodentia)...and are found from deserts and forests to high, rocky mountainsides.

Wood rats are pale buff, gray or reddish brown, usually with white undersides and feet. They have relatively large furry ears and, hairy tails. They range in length from 8 to 20 inches, including their 3- to 9-inch tail.

Wood rats generally live in nests built of branches, twigs, sticks and whatever strikes their fancy. The huge, structures may be up to 4 feet across... Wood rats can become quite a nuisance, getting into everything from attics to car engines, stealing treasures, damaging electrical wiring and wreaking general, noisy havoc...”

The article suggested cutting off the rat’s food supply and using the various traps, and poisons he had already tried.

Early one Saturday morning soon after the rat moved in, my practical grandmother, “Grandma Nellie” showed up, “This has gone on long enough,” she said. “It is time we had a rat bat.” A rat bat? Up until that time the only way I had heard that term used was when my father said, “You’re not getting anything done. You are just batting rats.” Just what a real rat bat would be I couldn’t imagine. My grandmother explained it, “We’ll go down to the cellar and get that rat.”

My little sister, Sara, and I desperately wanted to be in on the thrilling event. But it was not to be. We were banished from the cellar to peek in the tiny window above the freezer, a very unsatisfying vantage point. All we could see from there was Mom perched on the

freezer brandishing a tennis racquet and Dad and Grandma going for the rat. We couldn't see much through the tiny window, but we could hear the melee.

Amid the futile crashing and banging by Dad and Grandma and the loud scurrying of the rodent it was clear that no-one was winning. Dad hollered for a garden rake and my sister and I dashed to the chicken house to get it. I handed the rake in the cellar door. Then it was back to our post at the window. The noise continued, occasionally punctuated by a squeal or a shout.

In the end, Grandma Nellie held the rat down with the rake and Dad beaned him with a hammer. Mom, tennis racquet still in hand, remained on the freezer.

The three of them emerged victorious with a very large, very furry, very dead wood rat. It looked like a stuffed animal you could win at the carnival.

"Just batting rats?" Not that day.