

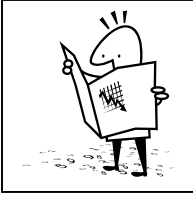
And Then Came the Nutria: Part One

Several significant events occurred during the late 1930's, early 1940's to launch a new breed of fur bearing animals into Louisiana wetlands. The nutria rat originally from Argentina, was brought to Louisiana by farmers who sought to make a profit with the fur and meat of this animal (See Figure 6.). One of the more famous nutria farmers was Edward Avery McIlhenny, the Tabasco hot sauce magnate. He was blamed for single-handedly introducing the nutria to Louisiana. This legend can finally be put to rest. In 2002, Shane Bernard, a family historian, discovered the truth about how the nutria came to run rampant in Louisiana. He researched records that showed that E.A. McIlhenny was not the first nutria farmer in Louisiana. At first many farmers bought nutria in Louisiana, looking at them as a business investment. After several years of nutria fur being popular throughout the world, the demand receded drastically. The nutria were intentionally let loose by nutria farmers. The full account is found on pages 51-54.



picture by W.L. Berry, LL&E

Figure 6. Nutria (*Myocaster coypus*).



The Times-Picayune (09/29/2002)

Nutria tales: The rat's out of the bag: Tabasco mogul didn't bring rodents here

For decades, Tabasco hot sauce magnate E.A. McIlhenny has been single-handedly blamed for introducing nutria to Louisiana.

Legend has it that in 1937, McIlhenny brought 13 of the orange-tooth rodents from Argentina to his home on Avery Island, in an effort to diversify Louisiana's fur industry. Three years later, a hurricane blew down his nutria pen, and the fast-breeding rats escaped to begin reproducing and chomping through the state's fragile marshes.

Now, a historian for the McIlhenny family says the account – perpetuated in part by McIlhenny himself – is more folklore than fact.

The real story, according to McIlhenny's personal records, is that the self-taught biologist and businessman was neither the first to breed nor the first to release nutria in the state, and was just one of several nutria farmers experimenting with foreign fur-bearers in the 1930s and '40s.

"I had heard the traditional story about E.A. importing the nutria and figured since it was my job to be the family historian, it ought to be easy enough to prove," said Shane Bernard, who recently published findings in the journal *Louisiana History*. "So I started looking through his files and began to notice, almost immediately, discrepancies with the story. What I found disputed things even the McIlhenny family itself had come to believe."

Source began in Abita

It was actually 1938 when McIlhenny, son of Tabasco owner Edmund McIlhenny, bought his first clan of the giant swimming rats: 14 adults and six kits for \$112.

And despite his tale that he imported the rodents from Argentina, records show that McIlhenny bought the nutria from a farmer in St. Bernard Parish via a New Orleans fur dealer. Though the farmer's name was not in McIlhenny's records, a narrative account of the sale and the name of the dealer who facilitated the purchase, A. Bernstein, are detailed, Bernard said.

A second nutria farm, this one operated by Henry Conrad Brote in St. Tammany Parish, also appears to predate McIlhenny's colony, according to a letter from Brote's wife found in McIlhenny's records.

Brote was a merchant marine officer who imported 18 nutria from South America in 1933, according to his personal cargo logs, now housed at the Earl K. Long Library at the University of New Orleans. He and his wife, Susan, raised the rodents in brick pens with the hope of selling the animals to fur dealers. When they failed to make money, however, they released the nutria in 1937 into the wild near their home on the Abita River just outside Abita Springs, according to a letter Susan Brote sent McIlhenny in 1945 and a letter that her daughter, Pat Rittiner, wrote to The Times-Picayune in 1988.

A third nutria colony might have been present about the same time in St. James Parish. According to a trapping log housed at UNO's library, the Lutchter & Moore Cypress Lumber Co. recorded the sale of one nutria pelt on Jan. 5, 1941, to fur dealer Bob Itzkoff on Decatur Street in New Orleans. Louis Bezee, on company land, had trapped the nutria during the 1940-41 winter hunting season, the log shows.

Hurricane story hot air

History soon became muddled; however, because of McIlhenny's penchant for boasting that he was responsible for introducing the fur-bearer to Louisiana's thriving trapping industry. His assertion was even published in 1945, when The Times-Picayune printed a letter McIlhenny wrote to a member of the Houma-Terrebonne Chamber of Commerce stating: "I originally brought 15 pairs of the animals from the Argentine...and have liberated probably 150 pairs of these animals in Iberia Parish since 1940."

The letter came as no surprise to Bernard.

"He was well-known on the island for his gift for spinning yarns," Bernard said. "I think he saw himself as an entertainer when relating his personal history. He took liberties in a good-natured way, and because the nutria became so successful, I think he was eager to take credit for their success."

McIlhenny did become a major contributor to the propagation of nutria into the wild, a release that, contrary to folklore, had nothing to do with the hurricane that struck that year, Bernard said. McIlhenny wrote in a memo that he "liberated" 21 nutria, seven males and 14 females, on Avery Island for one reason: to bolster the fur industry. His records contain no documentation that the hurricane damaged the nutria pen or that any nutria escaped, Bernard said.



A year later McIlhenny's plan appeared to be working. Trappers reported capturing 41 nutria on the island, and the number would quickly boom to thousands by the end of the decade.

Changing fashions

During the next few years, McIlhenny continued to sell breeding stock and share in the fur profits from nutria trapped on his property. Then, in 1945, he decided to release his entire colony into the marshes on his land in Iberia and Vermillion Parishes, Bernard said. The release likely included hundreds of full-grown nutria, Bernard said.

McIlhenny died in 1949, leaving behind the legend that he alone introduced nutria to Louisiana.

But the designation, however enviable at the time, would eventually tarnish the family history.

In the late 20th century, Louisiana trappers all but stopped hunting nutria because the price of the pelts plummeted. The overall fur market had bottomed out because of fashion changes, the anti-fur movement and global saturation of the market.

With no human predators, the nutria population exploded, and the voracious vegetarians began chewing their way through the grass of the state's coastal wetlands, marshes and drainage canals – exacerbating the growing problem of Louisiana's disappearing coastline.

In Jefferson Parish, the nocturnal “rats” soon became Public Enemy No. 1, with officials scrambling for ways to control their numbers. Some measures seemed downright laughable: Sheriff Harry Lee assembled a team of sharpshooters to hunt nutria in drainage canals, and state officials started a campaign to encourage residents to begin eating more nutria meat.

But desperate times called for desperate measures.

Record finally set straight

As the controversy over nutria grew, newspapers and magazines continued to repeat the story of E.A. McIlhenny, to the consternation of his descendants.

Ned Simmons, McIlhenny's grandson and the President of Avery Island Inc., said he always suspected the story was not entirely accurate. So when Bernard approached him with a proposal to research the subject, he welcomed the idea.



“With any company like ours, myth, error and falsification gets woven into the story and gets repeated until it becomes fact,” said Simmons, 74.

Simmons had no illusions that the research would clear his family of all association with the marsh-eating rodents. He readily admits his grandfather’s role in bringing the species to the state. In fact, Avery Island is still full of nutria, he said.

“I asked Shane to tell us the truth as you find it,” Simmons said. “Our interest was not in anything but trying to set the record straight.”

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