

# The Long Liner

by Lt. Ken Didion, Ret.

It was close to 11:00 p.m. when I left the house and my crackling fireplace. There was a light snow falling as the green State truck came to life rather loudly in the still of the winter night. The calendar said it was spring, but winter isn't over in the Adirondacks of northern New York until the ice leaves the lakes. That event wouldn't happen for another month or so. Things were looking up, however. In another hour it would be the first day of April and the opening day of trout season. The Oswegatchie River below the dam at Cranberry Lake had received its traditional stocking of brook trout two days ago in preparation for the season opener. Since this was one of the few places in the western portion of the Adirondacks with open water this early in the year, it is traditionally a very popular location for fishing on the opening day. In fact, a few avid anglers could usually be found waiting on the bridge below the dam dancing to keep warm and checking their watches as they waited for midnight, the time that fishing could begin.

The hard-packed snow squeaked under the tires as I drove off toward the river. With the defroster going full blast, the windshield finally cleared as I drove through the village of Cranberry Lake. At the bridge, I was surprised to find myself alone. Apparently, the twelve degree temperature had discouraged even the hardiest of the early-bird fishermen. I patrolled the roads in the vicinity and returned to the bridge. At midnight I was still the only person at the river. Driving off, I decided to patrol a few miles east of the village to check the Grasse River as long as I was out and now thoroughly awake. The Grasse didn't get any stocked trout, but it held a good population of wild brookies, and a three mile stretch of the river had recently been opened to the public for fishing as a result of State land purchases.

Pulling into the parking area on the south side of the highway adjacent to the river, I noticed a pickup truck parked near the riverbank where a rapids keep the river from freezing through most of the winter. A few large flakes of snow floated down as I stepped out of my patrol vehicle. It actually felt like it was warming up some. There were no footprints in the snow behind the truck where I could see the river boiling over the rocks. With no one fishing, I turned my attention to the beat-up truck. My flashlight lit up the inside of the cab, where I could see a man curled up in a sleeping bag, sleeping on the seat. Through the window of the cap on the back of the truck, I could see a considerable assortment of traps and trapping equipment.

"Longliner", I thought, returning to the State truck which was running loudly in the darkness. "And a sound sleeper at that." I knew all the trappers in the area and the vehicles that they drove. This guy was not someone that I was familiar with. It wasn't unusual to run into longline trappers in this part of the Adirondacks. With an abundance of mink and beaver in the area, I had seen trappers from Pennsylvania, Vermont, Maine, Ohio and as far away as Colorado show up in the past to try their luck. This trapper was a resident of New York State according to his license plate.

Back in my patrol vehicle, I made an entry in the notepad that I kept hanging on the police radio. As I routinely did when circumstances were slightly out of the ordinary, I wrote down the license plate number, a description of the truck, and the date, time and location. With that completed, I drove off toward home.

Dawn brought a new light rain with it. It was encouraging to realize that the temperature was above freezing. The aroma of the fresh coffee in the diner helped to wake me up after a short night's sleep. There were only a couple other village residents at the counter at this early hour. Our conversation just briefly touched on fishing and then went on to other more pertinent matters. The locals were pretty much in agreement that the real fishing didn't start until the ice was gone and they could get on the trout ponds in the backcountry. It was commonly accepted that the people fishing for stocked trout in the river on opening day fell into three basic categories. Either they were city dwellers, they were just plain crazy, or they were fly fishermen. The fly fishermen were excused since everyone knew they were a little strange anyway. They even admitted it, but preferred to call it being "eccentric".

The fishing pressure was light on the river. The steady rain had kept the number of fishermen down and after a couple of hours of checking licenses and watching wet fishermen come and go, I headed the State truck for the village of Degrass to meet Conservation Officer Dick Matzell. Traveling west on the state highway, I passed through the village of Star Lake. A few miles further there was a truck pulled off on the shoulder of the road. Pulling up behind it, I realized it was the same truck that I had seen parked at the Grasse River the night before. Maple Mountain Creek flowed along the south side

of the highway, but it was out of sight down a steep embankment and on the other side of wooded area. I knew there was a series of freshly constructed beaver dams along this stretch of water and this is where the trapper had to be. Stepping out of the truck and into the rain, I could hear someone climbing the embankment. The trapper appeared carrying a packbasket of equipment and walked up the highway to where I waited. We exchanged the standard pleasantries about the weather and trapping and I asked to see his trapping license. He appeared familiar to me and when I read the name Patrick Smith on his license, my memory was jogged. This was the same individual that I had checked two years ago just a few miles further west on a beaver flow near the Flatrock area of the Oswegatchie River. When I mentioned this, he said that he remembered me from that day and that he hadn't gotten back to trap the area last year. We concluded our conversation and Mr. Smith drove off. I sat in the truck and flipped through my notebook until I located the information I had written the night before. I added the name Patrick A. Smith along with his date of birth to that page. Then I struggled into my hip boots, pulled my hat down, and slogged off in the rain to check Mr. Smith's beaver sets to make sure they complied with regulations.

Over the next couple of weeks, I had occasion to check Mr. Smith's sets in several other locations and found little to be concerned with. On one occasion, however, I was checking a string of his beaver sets along Peavine Creek and found one trap which was not tagged with the name and address of the operator as required. After springing the trap, I hung it on the stake to which it was attached and left my business card clamped in the jaws of the trap with a reminder written on the back that all traps needed to be tagged. Re-checking the area a few days later, I found that all the traps had been removed, and thought it somewhat strange. It became apparent over the next week or so that Mr. Smith had picked up all his traps and had disappeared from the area.

It appeared that Mr. Smith was not comfortable with close scrutiny by the law and, during a conversation with one of the local trappers, I began to see why. Trappers are a rather territorial lot by nature and are not very trusting of strangers trapping on what they consider to be their turf. While sealing furs for a local trapper, he mentioned that a couple of his traps had recently disappeared and that he suspected that the out-of-town trapper was responsible. When I mentioned the name Patrick Smith to him, the local trapper indicated that one of the fur buyers knew the man and had referred to him by another name. Intrigued by this information, I began to conduct some routine inquiries on Mr. Smith. Referring to my notes, I ran a driver's license check using the name and date of birth as I had noted from Patrick Smith's trapping license. When the results came back indicating that there was no license on file for anyone by that name and birth date, I ran a check on the license plate from the truck he had been driving. The truck was registered to a William Combs of Little Falls, New York. This was the name that had been mentioned by the fur buyer. A couple of possible explanations came to mind for the inconsistencies. Either William Combs was using Patrick Smith's trapping license, or Patrick Smith was driving William Combs' truck without a driver's license. The first possibility seemed the more likely to me. Either way, this had now become a criminal investigation.

Paul Hawthorne and Burt Rumrill were conservation officers who patrolled the area in and around Little Falls in the southern part of Herkimer County. Phone calls to these officers brought more interesting information to light. Neither officer had ever heard of a trapper by the name of Patrick Smith. However, both of them were acquainted with William Combs. In fact, they had arrested William Combs so many times for conservation law violations that his hunting and trapping privileges had been revoked for the past six years and would not be restored for another two years. I was beginning to think that it might be longer than that.

In order to sell beaver pelts in New York State, they must first be affixed with a department seal which is a locking plastic strip with a serial number for tracking. These seals are affixed only by department wildlife officials or conservation officers, so my next task was to find out if anyone in the department had sealed furs for either Patrick Smith or William Combs. Those inquiries met with immediate and unexpected success. Department biologist Ted Smith had sealed furs for Patrick Smith on the previous day at our regional office in Watertown. The best news was that Ted was scheduled to seal more pelts for Mr. Smith on the coming Saturday in Constableville, in Lewis County. This was an unexpected opportunity and I moved quickly to take advantage of it. I contacted Lt. Rick Nowack of Boonville and explained my case to him in detail. Lt. Nowack was the zone supervisor for Lewis County and, with his help, we developed a plan for the coming Saturday.

Early Saturday morning found me making the ninety minute trip to Constableville. It was April 24th, and this was the day scheduled for the annual deer survey in the Tug Hill winter deer yard. This survey is conducted each spring by Department

biologists and civilian volunteers to determine the effect of the winter on the whitetail deer population. The Department personnel and volunteers were meeting at the fire hall in the village of Constableville prior to the beginning of the survey. This was where Patrick Smith had been directed to meet with biologist Ted Smith to get the remainder of his pelts sealed.

I stopped in Castorland and picked up Conservation Officer Bob Ryan at his residence. We were the uniformed arrest team and would take up a position outside of the village on a back road. Lt. Nowack was operating undercover in plain clothes and would assist the biologist with the sealing of Patrick Smith's pelts and contact us by radio when the process was completed.

Bob and I got comfortable in a relatively remote area not far from the village and advised Lt. Nowack by radio that we were in position. Over coffee I explained the details of the investigation as it had progressed. Bob inquired as to what kind of truck our suspect drove. I described it to him and, looking up the road said, "about like that one." I found it difficult to believe, but he was driving up the hill right toward us. We had purposely avoided the main travel routes in and out of the village and picked the most remote area we could find close enough to provide a quick response when the lieutenant called. Yet here was our suspect coming right up our road. In law enforcement work, things don't always go as planned.

There was nothing we could do but sit there in Bob's state bronco with the police insignias on the doors and the red lights on the roof and wonder what he was doing on "our" road. I quickly put on my Stetson and sunglasses, hoping he wouldn't recognize me. As he drove by, Bob and I discussed our options. Before we came to a decision, the truck turned around and came back. The driver got out and walked up to the driver's window and asked Bob for directions to the fire hall. He was lost!

Bob is one of our unit's K-9 handlers and his big shepherd, Barney, immediately tried to eat our suspect when he approached too close to the truck. With all the commotion from the dog, I don't think the trapper even noticed me in the passenger seat, much less recognize me through sunglasses and Stetson pulled down to my nose. As he drove off toward the fire hall, I contacted Lt. Nowack and requested that he notify us as soon as the suspect arrived. We were concerned that if he had become suspicious, he would simply depart the area. We would attempt to catch him if he didn't show up within a few minutes. We rolled slowly toward the village just in case. The radio call came. Mr. Smith had just arrived at the to get his pelts sealed. Our luck had held and we breathed a sigh of relief.

We didn't have to wait long for Lt. Nowak's next radio call letting us know that the fur sealing process was almost complete. This was our cue to move in. Arriving at the fire company's parking lot, I was surprised at the size of the crowd. There were a half dozen Department employees and what must have been thirty or forty civilian volunteers looking on as we stepped out of the truck. Lt. Nowak and wildlife biologist Ted Smith were at the rear of Patrick Smith's pickup truck putting the last of the plastic seals on the suspect's beaver pelts. As I stepped up, the lieutenant handed me Patrick's trapping license. Approaching the suspect, I said good morning to him and inquired as to whether he remembered me. "Yeah, you're the game warden from Cranberry Lake," he replied as he glanced curiously at Officer Ryan who had taken up a position near him.

I engaged him in a short conversation regarding his trapping in my patrol area, asking simple questions regarding our meeting, locations he'd trapped, if he had found my business card in his trap, and whether this was his trapping license that I held in my hand. I knew we had our man, but his answers, in front of numerous witnesses, confirmed that he was the Patrick Smith that I had met earlier in the month and would preclude him from denying it later. When I asked if he had his driver's license with him, he hesitated. "Yeah, why?" he finally asked.

"Let me see it," was all I said.

The suspect wilted visibly and I suspect that he had never experienced a worse moment in his life.

The license had the suspect's picture on it, but the name, as I suspected, was William Combs. I took my time studying the driver's license and the trapping license side by side. The suspect shifted uncomfortably.

"So, which one of these people are you?" I finally asked him.

"I'm Bill Combs." It was a whisper. He appeared completely deflated.

I advised Mr. Combs that he was under arrest. We quickly handcuffed him, searched him for weapons, and placed him in the state truck with Barney to keep him company. The defendant's pickup truck and its contents were seized as evidence and impounded. Arrangements for a tow truck to be dispatched to our location were made with a radio call to the Lewis County Sheriff's Office. While Lt. Nowack stayed behind to see that the impounded truck was towed to our DEC facility in Dadville and secured at that location, Bob and I transported the defendant to the sheriff's office in Lowville.

Bill Combs was advised of his rights and agreed to answer our questions about his activities. His story was not complicated. His estranged wife had attended and completed a trapper training course using her maiden name, Patricia Smith. This course is required in New York State for a person to be eligible for a trapping license. Upon completion of the course, she was issued a certificate which Bill Coombs altered and used to purchase a trapping license in the name of Patrick Smith. Using that license, he continued to trap areas of the state where he was not personally known to the conservation officers. The amount of fur taken illegally by Bill Combs during this period of time will never be known, but we believe that it must have been considerable. As a result of this investigation, a total of fifty-nine beaver pelts and twenty muskrat pelts were seized.

The defendant was processed at the sheriff's office and transported to the town of West Turin Court for arraignment before Town Justice Beatrice Bailey. The judge remanded Mr. Combs to the county jail in lieu of \$5000.00 cash bail.

The charges against Bill Combs were numerous and involved multiple jurisdictions. He faced forgery charges in Herkimer County, Criminal Impersonation charges in Lewis, Jefferson and St. Lawrence Counties. There were forty-seven felony counts of Offering False Instrumentation for Filing charges in Lewis County and eighteen counts in Jefferson County. In addition, there were multiple Environmental Conservation Law charges involving illegal possession of wildlife, trapping while revoked, making a false statement in applying for a license, and procuring a license for which not eligible.

With the cooperation of the District Attorneys of all the counties involved, the terms of a plea bargain arrangement were agreed to by all parties. Bill Combs pled guilty to two felony counts of Offering a False Instrument for Filing for which he was sentenced to, and served, six months in jail and five years probation. He pled guilty to all Environmental Conservation Law charges for which he paid five thousand dollars in penalties and the revocation of his trapping privileges in New York State were extended until the year 2000.

Bill Combs does not confine his activities to the state of New York. In a recent conversation with Conservation Officer Mike Sabaka of the South Carolina Wildlife Department, he informed me that Bill had been arrested by one of their officers and charged with failing to check his traps within the required time period. Dave Georgia, a warden with the Maine Warden Service, recently charged Bill with trapping beaver during the closed season. Bill pled guilty to that charge and paid a fine of \$147.50.

William E. Combs is an individual that all wildlife enforcement officers should be aware of. To my knowledge, he has never displayed the temperament of a Claude Dallas, but he appears to be of a similar mind set when it comes to using and abusing our natural resources. He has, over the years, repeatedly demonstrated that he has absolutely no regard for the laws that govern the taking of wildlife. He has spent a considerable portion of his adult life violating those laws and others in order to facilitate his pursuit of wildlife. Bill Combs depends on trapping for most of his income and only works at other temporary jobs when he can't trap. He has been known to trap in a number of states, including New York, South Carolina, and Maine. His father lives in Colorado, and his probation officer recently gave him permission to visit Wyoming to look for work. Where he will be trapping in the future is anyone's guess.