

Skinning Rats

by Rev. Joe Dirt - Tuesday, January 19, 2010

<http://www.curmudgeon-alley.com/skinning-rats/>

It was the fall of 1978, my son was five years old and my daughter 8. They were “knee high to a grasshopper” as they say in Arklahoma. I was attending Central State University, since renamed to the University of Central Oklahoma. I was majoring in Biology.

Why Biology? First I had a real love for the science. Secondly, I had always done well in this branch of the sciences. I had basically been forced into a business degree program my first year of college and nearly flunked out. It was a lack of interest and other factors (partying??). In retrospect I might have better served myself and my family to have gotten my computer science degree at that time rather than the B.S. in Biology. The punch cards intimidated me, and at time I had doubts about my intellectual capacity. Dissecting struck me as easier than flow charts. Plus, I’ve made a real study of coming to the fork in the road and taking the wrong tine.

This particular semester I was taking several courses, but Mammalogy 4263 taught by Dr. Caire is of interest here. Dr. Caire had his M.S. in rats, and his PhD in bats. We spent much time in bat caves that semester.

Part of the requirement for this course was to collect 12 specimens for the school’s collection of mammals. The easiest mammals to collect, besides road kill, are mice and rats. After I got serious about school which could also be read when I had to pay for it myself, I became a bit of an overachiever. That semester I turned in 18 specimens. This included 2 or 3 bats, a rare shrew given to us by a Park Ranger and several rats. One of the rats was a specimen not previously in the school’s collection. The sound you hear is me patting myself on the back.

Rats are generally caught in live cages that are set up in places likely to have runs for field mice and rats. After they are collected they have to be skinned. The skull has to be saved as it is very important in species identification. The skulls are cleaned by flesh eating beetles that the school kept just for this purpose. After skinning the “pelts” are stuffed with cotton, possibly bits of wood are inserted into the legs to help with the shape, and the skin is sewn back up. You then pin them on a piece of cardboard and let them dry for a few days.

After one particular successful night of collecting I had 6 specimens of field rats to process. My wife (now ex) was not home so I did what any husband would in that situation. I spread newspaper thickly on the kitchen table and begin to work on my haul. My kids were there and quite fascinated by Pop and his rats. I had probably got thru one or two of these sacrifices to science education when I heard the door bell ring.

I answered the door with the kids in tow. There were two young men there dressed in white shirts. Mormons or Jehovah Witnesses I don’t remember, but they wanted to come in and talk to me. Now Rev. Joe was a low TT (Tolerance Threshold) when it comes to Evangelicals of any stripe evangelizing at just

about any time. When they are on my door stoop my TT generally goes to zero. It was probably the two rug rats peering around my legs that reined me in slightly. I was trying to be civil.

The young men were just insistent that they needed to come in a talk to us.

I replied as politely as I knew how that, "I did not have time."

They kept on, and I kept explaining that I did not have time.

Finally in frustration I said, "I do not have time, I am skinning some rats."

The missionaries looked at each other, turned on their heels and left.

I do not quite know what their problem was, I told them the truth.

The first batch of mice I had collected and brought home to process no one had been there. I did my thing processing them and pinned them to some cardboard to dry.

This particular house had a detached garage, but for some reason I chose to put my trophies in the top of the master bedroom closet. My ex walked around for 2 or 3 days insisting that a mouse or rat had died n the wall.

One day when I was not there she discovered my handiwork in the closet. Let us just say she was not happy with me and let me know about it when I came home.