



The Survival of Ahmeek

by Paul Annixter

Toward owl-light¹ one September day the forest stillness above Vermilion Creek was filled with a strange stir and rustle of scurrying feet. Not the brief,

¹*owl-light*, dusk.

furtive movement of skilled prowlers, but a steady, unheeding scuttle of hurrying forms. These woods were witnessing a rare occurrence—the overland march of a company of beavers

from one watercourse to another—a most hazardous undertaking which is attempted only in time of great peril.

This was the end of a night and two days' steady march—some fifty miles through an area where coyotes, wolves, minks, and bobcats roamed. The chances had been all but one against their winning through. The one hope lay in the almost human intelligence of the beaver clan and the special sagacity of old Ahmeek, the leader. Ahmeek had seemed to know instinctively the direction he must follow, and except for unavoidable detours he held that course.

Now at last the early-risen moon saw him descending a long hardwood slope, his eight followers straggling behind him, footsore and waddling and all but exhausted. Owls hooted and soared above them in the gathering dark; often dry leaves and twigs crunched unheeded beneath their feet. But somewhere not far ahead was a stream. Ahmeek's instinct told him, and they pressed on at redoubled speed. Their need for water, both inward and outward, had become agonizing.

A half-hour more and Vermilion Creek came in sight, glinting like quicksilver in the moonlight. Downward now in a heedless rush Ahmeek herded his followers. There was a series of quick splashes, then nine blunt, brown heads appeared on the surface as their owners again lay resting on the luxurious buoyancy of their natural element. For a long time they fed and floated along the stream bank, and finally all set off upstream seeking a site for a new

home. Along the way the old chief often paused upon some rock to leave the musk sign of his clan so that any wandering beaver would know that he had passed that way.

Presently below a knoll covered with birch, poplar, and willow, Ahmeek climbed out upon the bank. A single twitch of his broad back flung all the water from his thick, oily coat. His mate joined him and for a space both sat erect, propped by their broad, flat tails, their blunt-nosed heads thrust straight upward, turning from side to side. Their five senses, their whiskers, and every hair-tip became part of a radio receiving set, tuned to the surrounding woods for danger. No threat was in the air, but the brown eyes of Ahmeek were searching for lurking enemies as he looked back the way he had come.

Back there lay a past that was terrible to remember, a time of grim persecution—of traps, dynamite, and tragedy; a time when the red carcasses of his fellows were floating in the water and turning black under the sun. And finally came retreat after retreat. In those days before protective laws were passed, trappers who killed without scruple for skins had brought about the near extermination of the colony. Four days before had seen the end of the bloody siege. Of the old, only Ahmeek and his mate had survived. Of their young, there were but the seven who followed him.

This spot at a bend of the stream was an ideal location for a new beaver dam.

Ahmeek lifted his broad, flat tail and sharply struck the ground twice. Pres-

ently from the water seven heads appeared. Two of the surviving youngsters were scarcely larger than muskrats. Knowing little as yet beyond keeping properly fed, they were little more than liabilities at a time like this, but they would work, under direction, without ceasing.

Ahmeek smelled of each in turn; low communication passed between them by means of a subdued, rapid clicking of teeth, faint as the sound of a sewing machine in a distant room. Then the old chief thumped his tail again. Tired as they were, work on a new dam began immediately. All night the nine labored felling trees and dragging the trimmed branches. Ahmeek and the youngsters did the cutting, while his mate set to work digging out a secret den for the little colony in the river bank, to be occupied until a lodge was built.

Most remarkable about all this activity was the uncanny silence with which it was accomplished. The only sound that could have attracted enemy ears was the crackle of the trees as they suddenly leaned and slithered to the ground. In entering or emerging from the stream the beavers made no more sound than as if they swam in oil. Their short coats were soft and moisture-proof.

Within four days a dam had been flung across the stream. It was a job worthy of trained engineers. The branches of the cut trees were anchored in mud and laid lengthwise with the current. On the upper face where the force of the water would but drive it

more tightly together, the mass was plastered with a cement of mud, brush, and stones. Several low places were left in the dam over which the current could spill. When the dam was finished the stream slid lightly over, but also overflowed its low banks above, making a deep pond which would soon become a culture bed for lilies and rushes—delicacies for the beavers' larder.

Old Ahmeek, as chief engineer, dove and swam the length of the dam inspecting it for leaks. Allowing for still greater fall in the water and the sagging of the ice in winter, there would still be ample storage room and air space in the pool for the keepers of the dam.

Immediately, at a signal from the patriarch, the nine craftsmen began another stupendous task: the building of a lodge in the shallow water at the edge of the now dammed-up pond. The base of the lodge was laid that night, a full twenty feet across. Balls of matted leaves, mud, and sticks were carried throughout the night. Seven workers swam with the endless loads while one of their number played mason with hand-like forepaws and still another seemed to act as a lookout, sitting motionless on top of the dam, his beady eyes taking note of every stir of leaf or ripple. The beavers knew what even astute human beings are slow to learn—that twice as much work can be accomplished by nine working in unison as by nine working separately.

With the coming of morning light the work did not stop. Winter was

close at hand. If the stream froze over before their lodge was finished and before the pool was supplied with food-wood, the colony would be doomed to slow starvation.

It was now that the beavers first became aware of enemies in the vicinity. An old tom lynx, lord of a nearby glen, watched the newcomers for several days, weighing the mystery of their presence.

One afternoon one of the smallest of the beaver family sat upon a log at the water's edge cleaning his fur. The noise of the waters deadened all other sounds. The lynx stalked the workers so masterfully that none dreamed of his presence until he leaped through the air, and the beaver found himself pinned to the log by two sets of saber-like claws.

Ahmeek's mate, working close by, flung herself straight at the killer with a chirring battle cry. It was like attacking a buzz saw. She was seized and ripped as by a hundred lancets, but happily she was built by nature for just such punishment. Her heavy hide was loose as an overcoat, and within it she rolled aside, eluding the dagger fangs that sought her life arteries.

Long chisel-like teeth, driven by muscles capable of splitting the hardest wood, caught the lynx's leg and clamped tight. The lynx was unable to stand the pain. Screaming, he tore himself free. Hissing and spitting like some faulty fireworks that wouldn't go off, he bounded away into the shadows, leaving red spatters of blood behind him.

Ahmeek's mate sat upright, chattering the story by tooth telegraph. Neither she nor the young beaver was seriously injured. But the band was to have no rest; other tests were in store.

The abrupt damming up of a forest stream is on a par with setting oneself up as the keeper of a tollgate on a traveled road; it is bound to be contested. The dam lowers the water level downstream, and the passage of fish is stopped.

A family of otters a mile below the dam, finding that the run of fish had ceased, set off upstream to investigate the matter. They appeared without warning one afternoon, and amid a great turmoil of splashing water and whistled calls they mounted the dam. The beavers, resting in their lodge at the time, were roused by the racket and set out to investigate. Their small eyes glowed in their blunt, furry faces at the sight of the intruders.

The keynote of the beavers' existence is work; that of the otters' is play. The otters are natural fish eaters, while the beavers are strictly vegetarians. Home to the otters is incidental; they are natural wanderers. To the beavers, home is the center of existence.

Ahmeek and his clan, instinctively defending their home, rushed around so briskly that soon the pool was cleared of the invaders, with no particular damage to either side. The otters went on their way upstream, leaving the victors scolding excitedly about the dam, examining and reexamining it for any injury.

Upstream the otters found the dam had its good side; for the fish traveling downriver would come up against the dam and turn bewilderedly back upstream to fall easy prey to the waiting otters.

But soon came bloodshed between the clans. One of the beavers met a young otter by chance above the dam and the two fell upon each other. Locked jowl to throat, they threshed and rolled at the stream's edge and finally sank beneath the surface. Their cutting teeth bit momentarily deeper and deeper, neither animal daring to release his hold. So the pair sank for a final time to the bottom still locked in that grim grip. There the bodies stayed till the following day when they rose to the surface to float aimlessly with the current.

It was thus that they were found by Long Tom Little-Bear, a half-Indian settler who owned twenty wooded acres just above the beavers' dam. Long Tom read the full story of the quarrel in the torn throats.

For a week past he had watched from a distance the laboring beavers on the lower edge of his land. The new dam had made the stream four times its original width, backing the water up into a broad pond ten feet deep, which spread out through the trees transforming what had formerly been a snake-and mosquito-infested marsh into a lakelike stretch of water where wild rice could thrive. By degrees the stretch would build up with good clean soil. For two years Long Tom had been unable to cope with this useless swamp-

land; now the job had been done for him by master engineers.

Long Tom recognized no gulf between the human and animal world. "Other Brother" his tribe had always called the beaver, in admiration of his almost human intelligence. Such benefaction called for payment, and soon numerous miracles came to Ahmeek and his band. They were continually finding piles of fresh-cut willow shoots on the stream bank, the food best loved by their clan, and thus the workers had no need to stop their labor to forage for food. And often now there came floating downstream bundles of brush, grass and weed, and young fresh-cut saplings, all of a size that beavers could handle.

All this was done without trace of human scent, and the material was seized and put to use with speed and skill. Long Tom was one to appreciate this survival struggle so like that of his own fast-vanishing people. The beaver lodge, he knew, was but half completed; only by much speed and great good fortune could the beavers win out against the approaching winter.

One afternoon the old tom lynx who had suffered the disastrous rout two weeks before, returned to try conclusions with the beavers again. Down to the same old log below the dam the lynx performed the identical stalk he had made before, with the same glow flaring and waning in his gooseberry eyes. But this time it was Ahmeek who sat on the end of the log, apparently lost in thought as he scratched himself and fingered the brown guard hairs

about his fat chops. A full minute before, however, the nerves which connect with his sense of smell had told him of the lynx's approach. The lynx's stalk ended in the same snarling rush as before, but a split second before his claws struck the log, Ahmeek had plopped cleanly into the depths of the stream.

When he came up from his dive, he beheld a most gratifying sight; the log from which he had just plunged had left its insecure moorings on the bank under the impact of the lynx's pounce. It was floating now, out into the water, revolving slowly. His tufted ears laid back, the lynx was scrambling desperately to keep his balance on the rolling log while every moment it floated farther from shore. Finally the log struck the dam and the lynx left in long leaps.

By now the castor signs left along the stream banks began to bring results. Three young male beavers appeared, eager to join the band. These Ahmeek grudgingly accepted but only after he had thoroughly cowed them, for lone males are too often troublemakers and are rarely permitted to join a family. They were good workers, however, and they were needed in these final days before the freeze, for each morning shell ice tinkled at the edges of the stream.

Each morning that the freeze held off, Long Tom grinned. The beavers' winning the race against winter meant more to him than anything that had happened since prereservation days.

And so because of Long Tom's aid,

the beavers' work was completed on the very day before the final freeze. The following night winter clamped down on the river, binding it with a sheet of ice over an inch thick. The beavers were virtually prisoners in their new lodge, dependent on the supply of storage wood they had collected and such roots and bulbs as they grew in their pool to tide them through till spring. All winter long, however, they kept an emergency opening in the ice at the upper end of the pond.

Under the biting gales that now blew daily, the forest world surrounding the river grew bleak and was frozen hard as iron. Snow swept across the surface of the ice. Up above, the beavers could hear faintly the creaking of wind-tossed trees. But down beneath the protecting ice, life moved on as orderly as on a spring morning. The water weeds swayed softly in the current just as they had in summer, and the beavers swam to and fro in water no colder than it had been in fall.

Day and night now the beavers lived to the quiet tune of the water sliding through their spillway. In winter everything depended on the safety of the dam. A break in it could prove fatal, for with ice solid over the stream, the beavers could not work to repair the damage. So at all hours the lulling sound of the water told them that all was well. But there came a day in January when there was a break in the tune. A violent splashing was heard in the dam that brought Ahmeek and his followers rushing from their lodge.

Upriver the otters had been finding a

scarcity of fish. Roaming abroad in winter as well as summer, they had finally sought fish in the beavers' deep dam where the last and wariest trout had sought safety. Swifter than the fish themselves, the otters had made three kills before the beavers appeared. Three otters were eating three fish at the edge of the dam and tainting the water with litter. No greater offense could have been devised from the beavers' standpoint. They arrived on the scene with a rush. For a space they stopped stone-still, eyeing the other clan from a distance of five or six feet, eyes glowing.

Now a strange thing happened perhaps for the first and only time in history—a battle between a family of beavers and a family of otters.

It was the big leading otter who gave the signal for attack, perhaps because fishing was poor and he was feeling the pangs of hunger. Straight at Ahmeek he flung himself, and the next instant the waters of the open pool were lashed to frenzy as six pairs of fighters locked and threshed together. Down into the icy depths of the dam the battle waged. Teeth snicked and ripped, and mud churned by the swirling water blacked out the battle.

Ahmeek's attempt to close with the leading otter had failed. With a trout-like flick, the otter chief had eluded him to close with a younger, smaller beaver, not through any faint-heartedness but with crafty intent to cut down the odds against him by one or two swift kills. Ahmeek in turn rushed in and closed with a younger otter. Each clan





leader made a swift kill; and simultaneously another pair of fighters, locked in a throat hold that would never be broken, sank beneath the ice.

Ahmeek's mate had met in furious combat with the mate of the otter chief. Locked together these two sank from sight in the middle of the pool. The two males, having kept instinctive tab on them, rushed to the spot. They met head on, coming together with ripping throat slashes, then turned aside, feinting like duelists for a killing grip. Ahmeek possessed the greater bulk and crushing power of jaw, but the otter was his master in agility. Again and again they struck, only to break apart for a more telling hold. Then the otter, overhasty, made the mistake that could not be undone. His jaws closed just above Ahmeek's shoulder and locked.

It was not a fatal hold. Ahmeek twisted around and achieved a much more vital grip, his teeth working in and in toward the jugular. Slowly the otter's hold relaxed, but in his death throes, his keen fangs loosened and struck in one last attempt, closing at the base of Ahmeek's neck.

Down into the choking depths they sank, the otter's body hanging like a millstone from Ahmeek's neck, weighting him down. With lungs close to bursting from prolonged strain, Ahmeek loosed his own jaws and put forth the last of his reserve to win back to the life-giving air. But the otter's weight was too much for him. Before he gained the surface the current had swept them along under the ice.

Still locked together they brought up

against the bulk of the dam, Ahmeek strangling now, all but done.

Death was but a few seconds away when the miraculous happened, timed to the second to save the old patriarch's life. An eddy swung them suddenly into clean pure air, beneath a rounded hummock of ice on the dam face, which had risen like a blister in freezing. There Ahmeek lay gasping with reeling senses until at last his strength returned, and he shook free of the otter's body.

Then came a movement just before him, and out of the water emerged the head of his mate. She was in similar plight after her battle with the she-otter. More dead than alive she grounded against the dam like a bit of driftwood. The two beavers rested together in the blessed air beneath the ice dome, doctoring each other's wounds with healing tongues.

Some time later the pair swam back to the lodge. The battle was long since over and the remaining two otters had fled downstream.

Three beavers had been killed before the enemy was routed. When Ahmeek sounded his rally call, nine workers answered the summons. The beavers had won and were still a colony, as strong in numbers as they had been in the fall.

As if nature had relented in her trials, the rest of the winter passed quite peacefully for the keepers of the dam. As they moved about at their work, warm and secure, listening to the wind and snow about the ice roof of their lodge, the small bright eyes of Ahmeek's band seemed to glow with

satisfaction over their conscious well-being.

In April the cold left almost overnight and the forest world was a-murmur with bird calls and a thousand chuckling rivulets. Another few days and poplar, willow, and birch were in bud, snakes were coming out of their hidden holes, and the gray cricket frogs were tuning it up in the shadowy places. Everything was in a mighty hurry after the long winter dark.

There was a song in the south wind the day Ahmeek first appeared in the open. The winter-slugish blood of the old beaver was roused by the spring rhapsody all about him. As he drew erect, making an aerial of his upthrust nose and body, he seemed to feel in the air the blessing of the wilderness gods that had tested him so long. The ordeals and terrors of a few months ago were not even memories now.

But this was only a beginning; work for the colony had only just started. Other lodges would soon be built by their growing members; drift logs and debris from the spring freshets must be cleared away. For labor in a beaver colony never ceases. No bit of construction is ever quite perfect enough; no dam is ever wholly beyond need of repair.

Ahmeek's tail smote downward presently like a water hammer, and out from the lodge came the rest of his band with five small additions—five little beavers born in the safety of the lodge, soon to become skilled artisans like their elders.

Later in the summer other beavers

might come but would not be permitted to join the band, and within another year many more dams would be flung across the stream. And in the silent woods along the streams a brotherhood of sleek and lovely creatures soon would be seen again at work and play, as in the great old days.



Talking it over

1. What qualities does Ahmeek possess which make him a good leader? Discuss the instances in which he shows these qualities.
2. What is Long Tom's attitude toward the beaver clan and why?
3. Which of the two statements below better expresses the main idea of this selection?
 - a. Beavers, because of their abilities, are extremely helpful to man.
 - b. Beavers have been fitted in many ways by Nature to survive.
4. Give examples to show why your answer to the above question is correct.

5. Write down, in outline form, the information about beavers contained in this selection. Be sure to include the following points:

- a. how beavers communicate
- b. how beavers build dams
- c. how beavers build lodges
- d. what beavers like to eat
- e. what some of the differences are between beavers and otters

Other brothers

Did you know that the Chippewa Indian word for beaver is *ahnik*? Though Ahmeek's ancestors were somewhat larger than he, in the days when Indians ruled the plains, they were no match for prehistoric beavers who weighed eight hundred pounds. These and other interesting facts are found in Leonard Lee Rue's *The World of the Beaver*. The author also traces a year in the life of a beaver through text and over one hundred photographs.

He struck a career on his claim

"When I was twenty years old, I took up a government timber claim in northern Minnesota. It was while proving up¹ on this claim that I began writing animal and hunting tales, from first-hand experience I had in the woods," writes Paul Annixter. "The orderly life of beaver colonies had always fascinated me. Later, near Taos, New Mexico, I ¹proving up, fulfilling the requirements for receiving government land.