

Dorothy loved beavers. It is said that she wrote her autobiography while holding a beaver on her lap.



Beavers in Her Basement

Dorothy Richards opened her home and her heart to New York's dwindling beaver population.

By Aline A. Newman



Beavers sat on her lap. They ate from a chair at her kitchen table. They swam in her cellar, wrestled in her living room, and snuggled in her bed. "My life is full of beavers," wrote Dorothy Richards, "and I hope it will be to the end."

It didn't start that way. Dorothy grew up in Little Falls, New York, among paper mills and textile factories. She skipped rope, played with her sister and brother, and watched boats on the Erie Canal. She was forty years old before she ever saw a beaver.

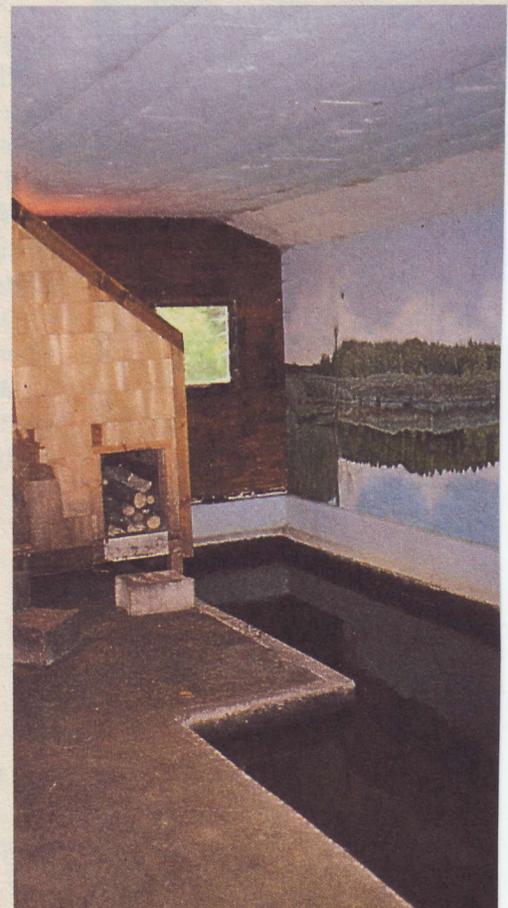
Beavers had lived all over New York State until someone discovered that their fur made great hats. Beaver hats were warm, and they shed water like an umbrella.

They became so popular that beavers almost became extinct. In 1895, the year after Dorothy was born, there was only one known family left in all of New York. Many states had none.

New York outlawed beaver trapping and stocked the Adirondacks with beavers brought from Canada. But during Dorothy's childhood, beavers remained as rare as whooping cranes are today.

By 1934, there still weren't any in Fulton County, where Dorothy and her husband, Al, lived. Their old farm was crisscrossed by slow-moving streams and overgrown with poplar trees—perfect land for beavers. She and Al asked the state's Conservation Department to release a pair on their land.

The beavers arrived by van on April 1. The driver set them down



The pool at Beaversprite.

beside Little Spruce Creek, and the beavers waddled into the brush.

A few months later, Dorothy stumbled upon a mud-and-stick dam stretched across the creek. It held back a pond as big as a grocery store parking lot.

Some people would have been angry, but Dorothy was delighted. She liked the idea that the pond made a home for muskrats, fish, ducks, and herons.

She visited the pond each night. The beavers got used to her and ate apples from her hand. Al took photos and Dorothy took notes. She wrote down everything she saw.



Dorothy decided to learn all there was to know about beavers. After eight years of pond sitting, she asked the Conservation Department for permission to bring beavers into her house. The officials were suspicious. What sort of woman would want beavers in her basement?

A government representative came to visit. He read her journals and sat at the pond and realized that Dorothy intended to study beavers, not keep them as pets. Her license soon arrived. It was the same kind given to zoos. Never before had one been granted to an individual in New York State.

At first, Dorothy's new guests roughed it in the root cellar. Later, Al added a room to the house. It looked like a cellar with a cathedral ceiling. Water piped from the creek filled a long, narrow concrete swimming pool. Above the pool, a wall of windows turned the living room into a viewing gallery.

Now that Dorothy could study beavers all year, she did little else. She was always in the cellar, "practically being another beaver,"



The Richardses' property made an ideal home for beavers. The beavers also liked the home's interior, as you can see in the picture below.

as she said. She watched them give birth, learned their language, and admired their habits. Each evening, Dorothy opened the cellar door so the beavers could join her and Al in the living room.

The more time Dorothy spent with the beavers, the more she understood that they are smart and lovable animals. She saw that beavers choose their mates carefully and stay together for life. And beavers learn from their mistakes. Once, a beaver named Chunk tumbled off a kitchen chair while trying to reach the table. After that, she never climbed up to the table again without first dragging over a pillow to break her fall.

And Dorothy learned that instead of cutting all the trees in one area, beaver lumberjacks cut out the larger trees in one spot, then move on to give the saplings time to grow. A few years later they return. By alternating back and forth, beavers don't destroy a forest or run out of food.

Dorothy wanted others to appreciate beavers, too. She turned her farm into a wildlife sanctuary known as Beaversprite.



Thousands of people from all over the world have come to visit, and though

Dorothy died in 1985, Beaversprite is still open to visitors by appointment. As "The Beaver Lady," Dorothy lectured, wrote magazine articles, and appeared on television. Her work helped the beaver population recover, and in 1975 the beaver was named the official animal of New York State.

