

Mamie Eisenhower, wife of U.S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower, wore a beaver coat given her by the Maine Trappers Association.

The coat was the brainchild of Jasper Haynes, also known as the "Flying Trapper" because he used a plane to run his traplines and as part of his hunting operation at Jo-Mary Lake. Haynes was something of a character but a respected outdoorsman with 45 years as a trapper and guide under his belt.

Haynes and his trapping partner Woodrow Craig collected a hundred beaver along the St. John River during the 1956-1957 season.

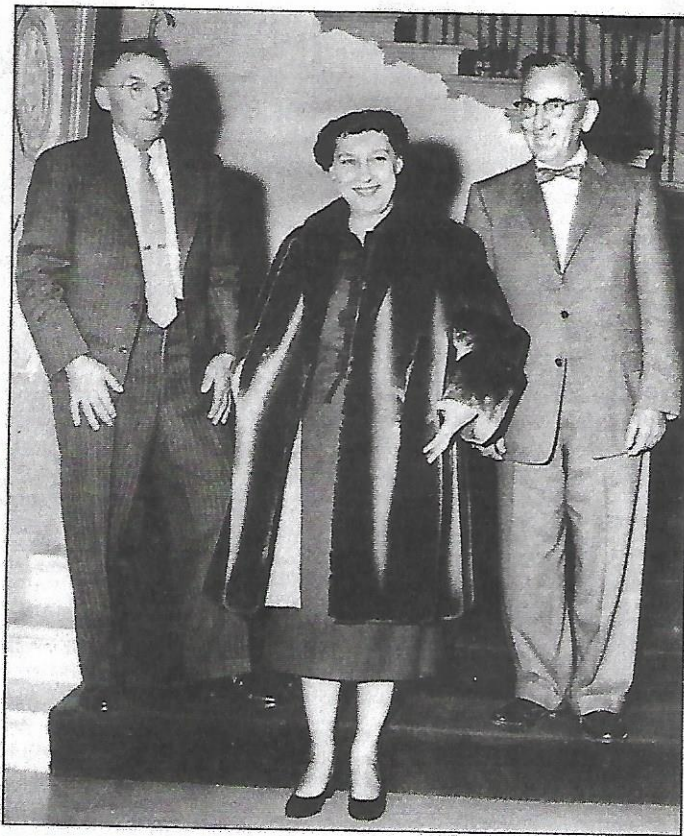
They also caught a live bobcat, placed it in a bag and flew it to Jasper's home in Millinocket.

Haynes got the idea for the coat from Jack Walsh, a trapper friend who was also a jeweler. When Walsh told him how quickly he had sold out of rhinestones after Mamie wore a dress covered with shimmering pink rhinestones at the 1953 inauguration, Haynes replied, "Why couldn't we get her to wear beaver?"

The market for beaver fur was down and still declining in late 1956 when Haynes finally sent an inquiry through Maine Sen. Margaret Chase, offering a beaver fur coat to the first lady. She declined, but after Haynes had a dream in which she changed her mind, he sent a second inquiry that spring, this one written on birch bark. He told her how Maine trappers were struggling with poor fur prices, that when a small beaver was caught through the ice it was dropped back through the hole because the pelt was only worth a dollar. He did not mention the dream.

Mamie replied immediately:

Your most recent letter changes my understanding of the purpose for which the Maine furriers offered me a beaver coat ... Whether or not my wearing a beaver coat can possibly help your sales, I do not know. But so long as



The Eisenhower Fur

How a Maine trapper talked the First Lady into a beaver fur coat

By Scot Dahms

you believe so, I would like to have the coat—but on the condition that I pay the actual cost of its production.

Mamie was concerned that accepting the coat as a gift would look bad for her husband. Oregon Sen. Wayne Morse had assailed President Eisenhower for accepting as gifts a \$4,000 tractor "with cigarette lighter," a bull worth \$1,000 and a large part of the rest of the livestock and machinery for his farm.

Although Haynes wanted to present the beaver coat immediately, Mamie suggested they wait until fall when it would be more beneficial to coat sales.

Congress also would not be in session then, which may have played a role in the timing. But then, right before the beaver coat was presented, it came out that the wife of the deputy chief of protocol at the State Department had kept a new Oldsmobile convertible given her by the king of Saudi Arabia.

Despite the controversy, the beaver

coat was still presented at the White House, and the presentation was staged for press photographers. Haynes and Clark, who presented the coat on behalf of the trappers, made sure everyone knew that Mamie had paid the furrier \$385 for making the coat. They did not mention that the luxurious three-quarter sheered garment with rolled cuff sleeves and 13 stripes representing the original colonies was fairly valued at \$1,800.

Mamie modeled the fur for photographers on the grand staircase in the White House north entrance. She did not speak with reporters, and when they moved closer to overhear her conversation with Haynes and Clark, Secret Service agents quickly waved them back.

While there was some political backlash, Eleanor Roosevelt, the previous first lady and a Democrat, came to the Republican First Lady's defense, penning an article

for the *Boston Daily Globe* that stated:

Mrs. Eisenhower has conducted herself with dignity and grace in the White House. ... this type of criticism seems to be petty and small and not worthy of the American press or the American people.

The next January, Haynes wrote a final letter to Mamie asking how she liked the coat. Mamie's personal secretary, Mary Jane McCaffree, wrote back on her behalf:

You may be certain that ... Mrs. Eisenhower is very pleased to have it. In fact, she wore it to Chicago when we went out there the other day for the United Republican Dinner.

The published photos and clippings Haynes had enclosed with his letter were returned and eventually wound up in a family scrapbook.

Haynes also mailed a letter to all 350 members of the Maine Trappers Association, asking for help covering his costs. Many contributed, including the famous trapper Walter Arnold. ■