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WORLD OF
GAMING**



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Snap Judgment on Light Fingers

BY DANIEL J. DEMERS



Americans in the 1800s didn't have video cameras, burglar alarms or fingerprint technology, but society then still had its share of burglars and robbers forcing citizens to be creative in catching pickpockets. Snapping turtles were employed for just such situations.

In 1842 John Tyler was President of the United States and the population of the country was 17 million. The population of Philadelphia was 81,000. It was in that year that a local man who visited the Philly post office “had his pockets picked,” according to an article in *the Sunbury American and Shamokin Journal* (PA). He returned to the scene of the crime, but this time he had “procured a small snapping turtle, which he stowed upwards, in the pocket of his long tail blue [coat].” Sure enough, while standing in line “he felt a nibble...and knew some light fingered

gentleman had mistaken the young reptile for a pocket wallet,” continued the article. Suddenly “a struggle commenced, a half suppressed acclamation, and the hand of the rogue...was withdrawn, the turtle keeping a fast grip to one of his fingers.” Those in the post office witnessed a “delinquent...holding up his hand in agony—the snapper holding on like a bulldog—a stream of blood running down on the floor, and the poor detested rascal...eyes streaming with tears...begging for mercy.”

A couple years later the District of Columbia’s *Washingtonian* newspaper reported a story about a thief at the Exchange Hotel who was helping himself to food from an outdoor larder. In days before refrigeration, such larders were used to keep freshly-killed game cool until it was time to cook it. One night the hotel landlord “substituted...[some] big snapping turtles for the smaller game and then watched the result.” The article continued, “In due time the epicurean thief arrived, lifted the lid, quietly inserted his hand...it was instantly gripped by a snapper...the marauder

“A year later a mechanically inclined fellow in New Orleans devised and built the first known mechanical snapping turtle.”

roared with pain, the snapper held on...and the landlord...roared with laughter.” The “wo-be gone” epicurean was finally released when the landlord cut off the turtle’s head to release it from the thief’s finger.

In 1851, ship Captain Martin K. Scott of Baltimore used snapping turtles to avenge “shake downs” by customs officials in Rio de Janeiro. Scott regularly sailed between Baltimore and Rio with commercial goods. An 1851 edition of the *Glasgow Missouri Weekly Time* (MO) reported that Scott “had been so often overhauled by the [Rio customs officers]...that he was determined upon revenge.”¹ Donning a “sack Coat” (a loose fitting coat which hangs from the shoulders) he deposited a snapping turtle in each of its two pockets. Almost immediately upon debarking in Rio, he noticed “two lynx-eyed” customs officials eyeing him. When the two pressed closely upon either side, they discovered the “packages hard to the touch...there was a simultaneous plunge into the pockets, followed by a scream...the hands were quickly withdrawn” with turtles hanging to a finger of each. The *Times* concluded, “The surprise of one party and the mirth of the other were about equal.”

A year later a mechanically inclined fellow in New Orleans devised and built the first known mechanical snapping turtle. The *New Orleans Delta* (LA) reported about a “noon time” incident in a French Quarter coffee house. The perpetrator was described as “very short, stout, queer looking individual who walked in and pushed himself up to the fire” to warm himself. The previous year while visiting the same coffee house, he lost \$100 (\$4300 in current values) to a pickpocket. The incident, understandably, made him “so all-fired mad, and put a spirit of vengeance in [him]” resulting in his hitting upon a “plan” to deal with all pickpockets. The “old trapper” installed “two rows of sharp iron teeth...inserted into a couple of thin elastic steel ribs, united in the corners of the pocket, and forming a rim to its upper edge...the ribs and teeth were concealed under the lining of the coat.” As bait, he attached a “large well-stocked, pocket-book” (i.e., wallet) fastened by a ribbon. To activate the trap, a would-be pickpocket need only pull the wallet attached to

the ribbon which would spring the iron teeth together. The reporter who wrote the story concluded “the contrivance was admirable.”

And so it was that the “short, stout, queer looking” gentlemen moved “briskly up to the bar...[and] allowed the tail of his overcoat to fall behind him...[exposing] the gaping pocket to the prying observers.” The reporter heard a loud, sharp, snapping sound “followed immediately by a loud cry of “Oh! Murder, murder!—let go!”” The inventor gaped “with a mischievous grin...[while] the light-fingered gent [who] was making convulsive efforts to withdraw his hand [cried in agony] ...but the hand remained firmly wedged in the pocket.” The thief cried out “for mercy’s sake let go [of] my hand...My fingers! O! My fingers! Do let me go.” Finally, the man relented and released the trap. Feeling the thief had been punished enough, he intervened with the assembled coffee house patrons to let the pick pocket go and forebear police involvement.

In 1901, the *San Francisco Call* (CA) reported one of those stories which exemplifies how two wrongs don’t make a right. Just before boarding a train, a Japanese man bought a snapping turtle. At the time, passengers carrying “live animals” on a train were required to pay an additional fee which the Japanese man didn’t do. He hid the turtle in a small trunk-like box which he held “so carefully under his arms that a thief who was in the crowd was sure the man had something valuable in the box.” The thief got on the train and took the adjoining seat. “Taking the first opportunity he cut a small hole in the trunk with a sharp knife and slipped in his hand,” the *Call* continued. The turtle in turn “took hold of his fingers in a hearty way...gritting his teeth the thief tried to remove his hand but couldn’t... then he howled.” The Japanese man seized the thief and turned him over to the on-board railroad detectives who in turn turned him over to police at the next stop. Of course, “the traveler was punished for violating” railroad regulations and paid the requisite fee with a hefty fine added on top.

Oh those bygone days when snapping turtles punished the criminal on the spot—no judge or jury necessary. **PI**

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