

How The Muskrat Became A Fish

French Pete was once quoted in the Cincinnati Times Star inviting people to his Grosse Pointe home where his "ole woman" would cook muskrat for them. It would be so good they would say, "dat de mushrat is de fines' fish w'at swim de lac."



A legend persists in Monroe that local Catholics, forbidden to eat meat on Fridays, successfully petitioned the Pope in Rome to declare the muskrat to be a fish, since it seems to live mostly in or around water. The relatively inexpensive meat thus could provide greater variety in Friday fare, without being a strain on the pocketbook. At a 1938 meeting of the Monroe Exchange Club, several members claimed the local arguments were powerful enough to gain a special dispensation from the ecclesiastical authorities to permit the eating of muskrat in the Monroe vicinity on Fridays or fast days, right up to modern times. No papal document has yet come to light in support of this legend, but not for lack of believers.

According to Boyez Dansard, several of the French trappers here asked the priest whether muskrat was fish or not. The priest was frankly puzzled and called a town meeting where the biological classification of the muskrat was debated long and hotly. Finally, one respected elder rose in the meeting to declare: "The rat, he live in water - he no animal. The rat, he walk on land - he no fish. He mus' be vegetable."



A tradition in the Reau family states that the practice dates from the winter of 1813, when their family members were driven from their homes during the aftermath of the Battle of the River Raisin. Fleeing across the ice, they ended up on Guard Island in Maumee Bay. When Father Gabriel Richard found them huddled together in some native huts, they were starving and asked for a dispensation to eat muskrats on Friday. Father Richard granted their wish. Since then, settlers in the Bay area have claimed the dispensation applied only to them, not the rest of the French of Monroe or Newport. In more recent times, one local priest, Father Lambert LaVoy, said he had been asked hundreds of times in the confessional whether muskrat and diving ducks could be eaten as fish. While not claiming a dispensation for them, Father LaVoy simply asked if the person really believed it was fish or flesh. Those who considered it a fish were told they could eat it as such.



Up in Lansing, Bishop Kenneth Povish recalled that the muskrat question was finally settled in 1956 when it was agreed that eating muskrat dated back so far that it had become an “immemorial custom”, and therefore was allowed by canon law. The bishop apparently was not a muskrat connoisseur, since he reportedly said, “anyone who could eat muskrat was doing penance worthy of the greatest saints.” Regardless of individual beliefs, it remained a wide spread practice before World War II for housewives to call on local trappers to provide muskrats through the season for regular Friday fare. In 1987, the Archbishop of Detroit appalled many local Catholics by declaring muskrats could no longer be eaten as a fish. Although no longer tied to fasting on Fridays, several Catholic churches in Monroe County carry on the tradition by holding annual muskrat dinners for their parishioners. Unlike the Catholic churches and many secular organizations, protestant churches in Monroe County have not traditionally held muskrat dinners, although many of their members eat muskrat and have even been seen partaking of the

dinners sponsored by the Catholics. Not to be outdone, however, a number of protestant churches do hold annual game dinners, at which muskrat may be included on the menu.

