

Snakes in Madison County

BY EDITH WEBBER

Among the unattractive features of life in early Iowa, particularly in the southern and eastern parts of the state was the prevalence of rattlesnakes. These reptiles would not infrequently find their way into a settler's cabin and occasionally even into his bed. An incident is related of a rattlesnake which apparently about to attack a sleeping settler was seized and killed by his dog, though not before the faithful dog was bitten.

On another occasion a traveler who was passing through southeastern Iowa stopped one night at a cabin where lived two lonesome and disconsolate old bachelors. The guest was provided with supper but the bachelors refrained from eating. In the course of the afternoon they had killed more than 200 snakes and the thought of the squirming creatures had spoiled their appetites.

In Madison county snakes were particularly numerous. They frequented the rock ledges along the streams and there multiplied rapidly. Men wore leather leggings as a protection against them while women were terrified by their incessant rattling. One settler reported coming upon more than thirty snakes coiled up in the form of a ball. At another time two men killed ninety in an hour and a half. One man declared he had enough rattlesnakes on his farm to fence it.

While relatively few people were actually bitten by rattlesnakes, they were a constant menace. Boys who went barefoot in warm weather were in the greatest danger and had to be always on the alert. They could jump farther at the sound of a rattle than under any other circumstance. A plentiful supply of whiskey was thought to be the only cure for snake bite.

It's no wonder that the settlers got together and thought about some plan for exterminating snakes. At a public meeting sometime in the spring of 1848 a general snake

hunt was proposed. To increase the interest in the enterprise it was decided to divide the settlers into two groups and arrange for a snake killing contest. All those who lived north of Middle river constituted one company, while the settlers on the south of the river organized another company. William Combs was captain of one group, Ephriam Bilderback of the other.

To lend zest to the hunt each participant was to pledge a certain amount of corn as a sort of entrance fee, the whole stake to be awarded to the victorious company. The only regulations of the hunt were to go forth and kill as many snakes as possible. Each company was to keep within its own territory and all rattles were to be preserved as proof of the number of snakes killed. The Fourth of July was fixed as the date for the official count, and so the great snake hunt was launched.

Special efforts were made to get the rattlers before they left their dens in the spring, for it was the habit of rattlesnakes to hibernate in the rocky bluffs along the streams for the winter. When warm weather began in April or May, they came out on the sunny ledges in the middle of the day and crawled back into their dens at night. But as summer advanced, they left their winter habitation and scattered out into the brush.

The settlers were very busy every spring preparing the ground and planting their crops, but every noon on every warm day someone would go down to the snake dens to see if any of the reptiles were lying around in the sun. Usually some were caught. Of course the hunters were on the watch for snakes all the time, but on Sundays when their regular duties were not so pressing, they really worked at snake killing in earnest. It was customary to go armed with a club when watching the dens; a stick with a wire hook in the end was used to pull the snakes out of holes and from under rocks. Both companies hunted in earnest and rivalry ran high.

The Fourth of July, 1848, was a gala day in Madison county. All the snake hunters with their families gathered at Guye's Grove for the first celebration of Independence Day in that community. An ox was barbe-

cued for the occasion and Lysander W. Babbitt, candidate for the office of state representative, made a speech. But the event that attracted the greatest attention was the snake count.

A joint committee of two from each company was selected to count the rattles. Alfred D. Jones, a newcomer in the county, was appointed to act as clerk. The snake hunters presented their collection of rattles in bags, old pockets and stockings. When the count was completed, it was found that nearly four thousand snakes had lost their lives.

The north company won the contest, but the corn prize was never collected. Some say that the hunters were determined to have the corn ground at the mill and give the meal to a poor widow. Others say that the committee quarreled while under the influence of too much snake bite remedy.

At the barbeque a toast was offered to "the Captain and company of the Victorious Snaking Party. Their names will be handed down to future generations of Madison county for their snakish bravery."

Colesburg

The village of "Cole's Burgh" in northeastern Delaware county, one of the earlier settlements in Iowa, was largely the work of the remarkable Cole family. The widow, Andra Chase Cole brought her large family up the Mississippi by steamer from near St. Louis about 1835.

Hiram Cole, Liberty Washington Cole, and a son-in-law, Lawrence McNamee, helped to establish the town. Thomas Cole became postmaster in 1852, and James Cole who was also a surveyor, operated the mill after 1867.

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