

The Great Snake Hunt

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 a dog, though not before the snake had bitten the faithful canine. On another occasion a traveller 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. It appeared that in the course of the afternoon they had killed more than two hundred snakes, and thoughts of the squirming creatures had spoiled their appetite.

In Madison County snakes were particularly numerous. They frequented the rocky 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". It was said that one settler came upon more than thirty snakes coiled up in the form of a ball. At another time two men killed ninety of the reptiles in an hour and a half, and on a day "which was not

very good for rattlesnakes, neither". One pioneer used to remark that he had enough rattlesnakes on his farm to fence it. While relatively few people were actually bitten by rattlesnakes and only one or two died, the venomous creatures were a constant menace. Boys who went barefooted in warm weather were in the greatest danger, but they learned to be always alert. They could jump farther at the sound of a rattler than under any other circumstances. A plentiful supply of whisky — the only "sure cure" for snake bite — was kept on hand. Some people even seemed to think that whisky should be used as a preventive as well as a cure.

Under such conditions it is not surprising that the settlers cast about for some plan of exterminating the pests, or at least reducing their numbers considerably. At a public meeting sometime in the spring of 1848 a general snake hunt was proposed. To increase interest in the enterprise it was decided to divide the settlers into two groups and arrange for a contest in snake killing. All those who lived north of Middle River constituted one company, while the settlers south of the river organized another. William Combs was selected as captain of the north company and Ephraim Bilderback captain of the south company. 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 during 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 habitat and scattered out into the brush.

The settlers were very busy that spring preparing the ground and planting their crops, but at noon every warm day some one 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, the contest was waged with the greatest earnestness. It was customary to go armed with a club and 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 contest was spirited and deadly.

The Fourth of July, 1848, was a gala day in Madison County. All the snake hunters with their fami-

lies gathered at Guye's Grove for the first celebration of Independence Day in that community. An ox was barbecued for the occasion, and Lysander W. Babbitt, candidate for the office of State Representative, made a political 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 collections of rattles in bags, old pockets, and stockings. When the count was completed it was found that nearly four thousand rattlesnakes had lost their lives. "From that day to this snakes have not been common in Madison County".

The north company won the contest, but the corn prize was never collected. It seems that the hunters had determined to have the corn ground at the mill and give the meal to a poor widow who lived in the neighborhood. Some say that the committee quarrelled while under the influence of too much snake-bite remedy, and the project was dropped. More likely, since the object of the hunt had been accomplished, the bonus was forgotten.

And thus, in fulfillment of a toast that was offered at the barbecue "To the Captain and Company of the Victorious Snaking Party" their names are "handed down to the future generations of Madison County for their snakish bravery".

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