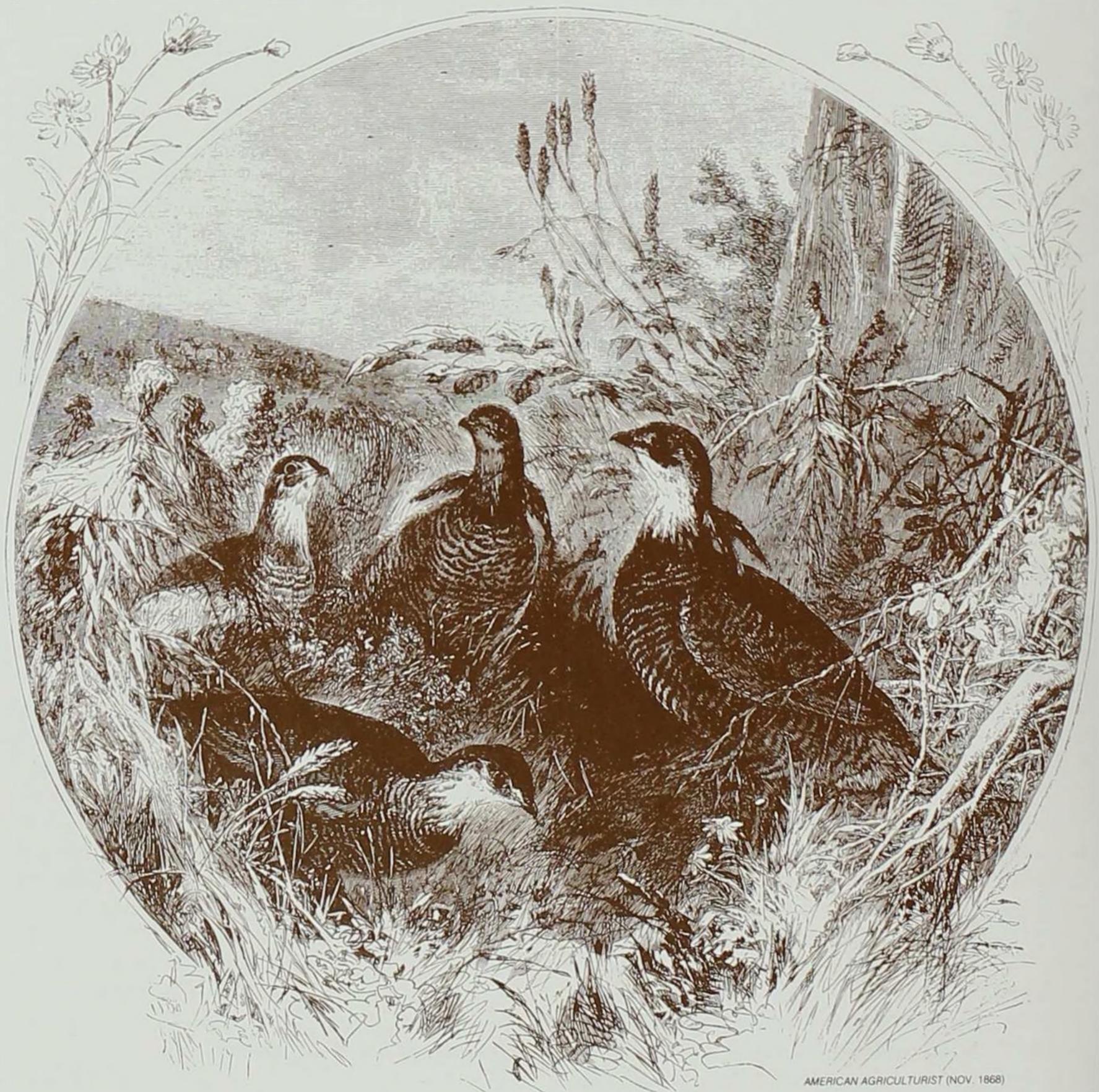


A Prairie Chicken Vignette



AMERICAN AGRICULTURIST (NOV. 1868)

by Charles P. Bennett

HAVE YOU EVER seen a prairie chicken's nest? I have, and it happened like this.

One sleepy, Sunday afternoon in the summer of 1910 in Ringgold County, my father remarked that the cattle in the far pasture would probably appreciate some salt, and did I want to go with him. Of course, I did! So we went down to the barn south of the house and put a bridle on "Old Lade" (short for "Lady").

Lade was a large, white mare that my Grandfather and Grandmother Jerrems had given my folks, Carolyn and Thayer Bennett, as a wedding gift in 1903. By now Lade had acquired a disease known as the "heaves," so she coughed whenever she engaged in strenuous activity. Sick or not, she was still a very large horse to a four-year-old boy.

Even for my father, who was about 5 feet 7, getting on a draft horse without a saddle was quite a challenge. It involved running and jumping as high on the horse as possible, then getting both elbows over Lade's back and squirming until one leg was on the other side.

Then, with one muscular arm, my father lifted me up and set me down in front of him. Mother handed us a sack of salt, and away we

went over the ridge and down the hill to what the Bennetts have always called the far pasture.

My father tied Old Lade to the fence, and we salted and counted the cattle. On our way back to the house, we traveled up along a draw, deep with slough grass. There was a sudden flurry of wings. A prairie chicken hen came out of the grass like a bullet and flew over the hill out of sight.

Father asked me if I would like to see a prairie chicken's nest. I did, so we got off the horse and easily found the nest under the tall slough grass. There were about a dozen eggs in it.

We spent perhaps ten minutes there, as my father took time to explain to me all about the habits, love life, and history of the prairie chicken. Then he got on Old Lade after a couple of tries, pulled me up, and together we rode back to the house.

The prairie chickens eventually disappeared, unable to adapt to changes in their environment. In fact, many things are gone now, but not my memory of a father who thought his four-year-old son was important enough for the time and effort of explaining what life was all about for a prairie chicken.

I am fully conscious that few men could have been so foolish — or so wise. □

Prairie Chicken Update

Prairie chickens were the most abundant game bird in Iowa in the nineteenth century. As their prairie habitat became increasingly cultivated, concerns for prairie chicken conservation grew. Iowa was the first state to impose bag limits on prairie chickens in 1878, which bolstered the bird's population temporarily, but could not compensate for the vanishing prairie. The last documented prairie chickens in Iowa were found in Appanoose County in the 1950s.

New hope for Iowa prairie chicken lovers came with 1985 federal farm legislation that included the Conservation Reserve Program,

which contracted farmers to set aside farmland for ten years. In Iowa, as much as 50,000 acres per county has been returned to undisturbed grassland.

With the return of the prairie chicken's habitat came an Iowa Department of Natural Resources (DNR) program to reintroduce a small population of the birds to Iowa. As Mel Moe, DNR wildlife biologist explained, "They epitomize the prairie, so we thought it suitable to bring them back — it's pretty historic." Since 1987, the DNR has brought a total of 450 prairie chickens from a population in Kansas and introduced them in Adair County and in Ringgold County (where our author Charles Bennett, now eighty-seven, still lives).

— *Becky Hawbaker*