

Man Versus Wolf

In addition to circular wolf hunts many pioneers went out alone in search of these wild banditti of the prairie. In 1842 a settler in the Black Hawk Purchase who signed himself "J. G." wrote a New York editor that the recent snows had enabled the pioneers to "walk into the wolves like showers in April." About twenty wolves were killed in the neighborhood, one of which lost his life in the following manner:

Early one morning last week, from the top of my corn-crib, I saw an old fellow slyly making his way through a field not far distant. I hastily bestrode a stout carriage horse, and was in so much of a hurry, that I forgot to put on the saddle. The little greyhound pups, only six months old, thought something was in the wind, so early in the morning, and followed, floundering in the snow-drifts, with a right good will, but at a rather long distance. Mr. Wolf soon found that he must make tracks from the corn-field, and lose his breakfast or his bacon. He whisked his tail, bid me good morning in haste, and broke for tall timber. I followed as fast as whipping and kicking and hallooing could make old Jack carry me over fences, through sloughs, up hills, and down snow-drifts. Wolf, finding he was to have close company, and thinking it too early in the day to be sociable, put through every corn-field, hollow, hill, and hazel patch that lay in his way, and when they were not in his way, he made way to them; but old

Jack had, in the fall, found out that a good stake and rider fence could be leaped, when green corn was within it, and with a little persuasion, soon took the fences like a trump, and the drifts and hazel thickets he cared not a scratch for. After a brisk chase of three miles, the wolf began to hang down his signal of distress, and soon surrendered in a snow-bank. A slight blow with the whip made him shut his shiners (wolves know well how to play 'possum'), and I yelled over him in triumph for a quarter of an hour. The little pups, like game fellows, came howling along through the snow as if the devil was after them, or they after the devil; they pitched right into the wolf, who soon waked up, and such a fight as they had you seldom see. As fast as he would bite one pup, he would run off and bellow like a coward, and another would take his place. By the aid of a butt-ender or two from my whip, they at last stretched him out; and, throwing him on the withers of my horse, I put for home in a very good humor with my morning's work.

R. W. Williamson, who settled in Warren County at an early date, was very fond of hunting. Once he captured three raccoons in a single night, on another occasion he bagged eight deer in four days. One morning, in 1856, Williamson and his brother got word that a "noted prairie wolf" was in the neighborhood. This wild despoiler of livestock was scarcely afraid of any dog but Williamson had an immense greyhound which could capture any coyote. The prairie wolf was quickly found, the fleet greyhound "soon overtook him and ran violently against him, knocking him down and keeping him so until the other dogs came up

and got hold of him." The wolf promptly played possum and when Mr. Williamson arrived on the scene he thought it was dead.

Jubilant over the capture, Mr. Williamson determined to tie the coyote behind the saddle on his mule and carry him home. He had hardly had an opportunity to complete his preparations for this work before his attention was attracted by the greyhound who was making "twenty feet at the jump" away from the hunters. Glancing up to see if his wolf was safe, Williamson found the supposed dead coyote speeding away quite a distance down the road. He had "quite a chase" before he succeeded in catching the wolf again, and he congratulated himself that he had thus been prevented from tying the vicious brute on his mule. "Since that time," Williamson concludes, "when I capture a wolf I am sure to ascertain that it is dead before I take any risks with it. I captured eight more wolves that winter, which was that of 1856, and none ever fooled me again."

Dogs were virtually a necessity for most wolf hunts. Only a few dogs possessed both the fleetness and courage to cope with their savage cousins. The pioneers often attempted to capture wolves with a "common cur" but found that they were "wholly unreliable" for such work. "So long as the wolf would run," our pioneer hunters found, "the cur would follow; but the wolf, being apparently acquainted with the character of

his pursuer, would either turn and place himself in a combative attitude, or else act upon the principle that 'discretion is the better part of valor' and throw himself upon his back, in token of surrender. This strategic performance would make instant peace between these two scions of the same house; and, not infrequently, dogs and wolves have been seen playing together like puppies. But the hound was never known to recognize a flag of truce; his baying seemed to signify 'no quarter,' or at least so the terrified wolf understood it."

Trapping a wolf was virtually impossible: they were far too cunning to be fooled in this fashion. Even as early as 1820 Dr. Say expressed astonishment at the extraordinary intelligence of the prairie wolves. One of the members of the Long expedition constructed and tried various kinds of traps but to no avail. A "live trap" of the shallow box variety and a large cage with a small entrance on the top both failed in their purpose. Many wolves put in an appearance but none would "bite" at the tempting bait.

In the case of the "steel trap" Dr. Say records that the trap was "profusely baited, and the whole, with the exception of the bait, was carefully concealed beneath the fallen leaves. This was also unsuccessful. Tracks of the anticipated victims were next day observed to be impressed in numbers on the earth near the spot, but still the trap, with its seductive charge, remained un-

touched. The bait was then removed from the trap, and suspended over it from the branch of a tree; several pieces of meat were also suspended in a similar manner, from trees in the vicinity; the following morning the bait over the trap alone remained. Supposing that their exquisite sense of smell warned them of the position of the trap, it was removed, and again covered with leaves, and the baits being disposed as before, the leaves to a considerable distance around were burned, and the trap remained perfectly concealed by ashes; still the bait over the trap was avoided."

David Scott, a pioneer of Appanoose County, on one occasion succeeded in trapping a cub wolf, which he promised his boys to tame. He chained the cub carefully but the next morning both wolf and chain were gone. The animal was captured two years later with the chain still fastened to him and as "bright as a dollar." In 1844, A. Covey, a Keokuk County pioneer, invented a wolf trap which was said to be "quite successful" in its way. Covey was reputed to have captured sixteen wolves in it that February. The trap was exhibited at an old settlers' reunion during the 1870's.