

Circular Wolf Hunts

It was with such ferocious animals that the pioneers of Iowa had to contend. The first settlers soon found that individual efforts were not enough to rid the country of these dangerous pests. Some joint action must be taken and the circular wolf hunt was the result. These circular wolf hunts were not common to Iowa alone: they had become an established custom in the States east of the Mississippi. There is probably not a county in Iowa whose citizens have not participated in a circular wolf hunt.

The first settlers who trooped into the Black Hawk Purchase during the 1830's participated in circular wolf hunts. According to Willard Barrows these wolf hunts were important social affairs that "helped to fill up the dreary days of winter" in Scott County. The pioneers in such towns as Burlington, Muscatine, and Dubuque also enjoyed these forays against the wolf.

According to a contemporary account "all the men and boys would turn out on an appointed day in a kind of circle comprising many square miles of territory, with horses and dogs, and then close up toward the center of their field of operations, gathering not only wolves, but also deer and many

smaller 'varmint.' Five, ten, or more wolves by this means would sometimes be killed in a single day. The men would be organized with as much system as a little army, every one being well posted in the meaning of every signal and the application of every rule. Guns were scarcely ever allowed to be brought on such occasions, as their use would be unavoidably dangerous. The dogs were depended upon for the final slaughter. The dogs, by the way, had all to be held in check by a cord in the hands of their keepers until the final signal was given to let them loose, when away they would all go to the center of battle, and a more exciting scene would follow than can easily be described."

Numerous illustrations of similar wolf hunts may be cited. According to Captain Hosea B. Horn, a resident of Bloomfield, the pioneers of Wyacondah Township in Davis County did more toward destroying the numerous and troublesome wolves than any other men in the county. The Wyacondah Township pioneers were generally joined by Reason Wilkinson and other Bloomfield wolf hunters, men who had removed the scalp from many a "prowling whelp." Captain Horn relates that on one occasion during the 1840's the whole neighborhood had turned out and soon "sprung up" a wolf. Hard pressed by the hounds, the wolf ran into the village and took refuge under a store.

The boys immediately surrounded the building with sticks and brick-bats, according to Captain Horn, and "by inserting a long pole under the house, his wolfship was induced to come forth, which he did amid the shower of missiles which were hurled at him from the hands of his enemies, which he managed however, to escape for a few minutes, but being hotly pursued by a fresh pack of dogs, besides men and boys, he was forced to go into quarters or yield up the ghost. Arriving at the ravine or hollow just above town, this fatigued and frightened mutton lover, dodged under an old log in order to hide himself. Unfortunately for him, however, Mr. Steele and Michael Rominger, were not far behind, and saw this attempt to escape by secreting himself, and having no fear of the wolf before their eyes, and instigated by sport generally and capturing this fellow, in particular, they seized his wolfship and slew him."

Samuel Hardesty recalled with pleasure the frequent "circle-hunts" in which he participated. Arriving in Keokuk County in 1843, Mr. Hardesty found wolves so numerous and troublesome that it was impossible to raise sheep, hogs, and even larger livestock. It was customary, according to Hardesty, for "some two or three hundred men to surround a considerable area of country and gradually close in, thus driving the wolves into a very small area, where they were slaughtered by the hundred." These circular wolf hunts generally

converged in the Skunk River bottom near where Mr. Hardesty later resided. This ravine-like area proved to be the "last ditch" for hundreds of these "predatory quadrupeds."

Smaller parties of men would often gather to hunt wolves. During the severe winter of 1842-1843 wolves were "unusually thick" in Iowa, many probably being driven by hunger from the Indian country into the settlements. Small parties were formed in many neighborhoods to hunt them. The mode of hunting wolves was to gather a party of twenty or thirty men on horseback and go out on the prairies with a pack of dogs. "When the snow was light," a pioneer pointed out, "the wolves would sink into it, and could not run as fast as a horse. The dogs were sent out to hunt up the wolves and the horsemen followed slowly after them till they started one, when the horsemen gave chase at the full speed of their horses, and would run over the wolf, or turn his course, and thus delay his flight till the dogs came up, and in this way they were almost sure to kill the wolf. Sometimes a wolf would get into a beaten track, when they were closely pursued, and would not leave it, and in this way they were frequently driven into the towns and killed in the public streets." The wolves had a "season of ease and plenty" when the snow became compact and a solid crust formed. Horses then broke through the crust and the wolves escaped easily. The snow

was not hard enough, however, to bear up the sharp small feet of the deer and the wolves easily overhauled and killed them.

Circular wolf hunts were popular throughout the nineteenth century. In 1860 farmers in the Floyd River Valley were "much annoyed" by the depredations of wolves upon their young stock. "Calves, sheep and pigs have in many instances, been destroyed by wolves," the *Sioux City Register* asserted, "and on last Saturday week the farmers of the Valley got up a regular wolf hunt, but failed in catching any of them."

Newspapers frequently carried announcements of circular wolf hunts. Under the caption "A Wolf Hunt," the *La Porte City Progress* of December 21, 1870, carried the following statement. "We learn from a communication from Mr. J. Sutherland, that prairie wolves are to be found in considerable numbers in and near the timber below La Porte City, on the east side of the river, and that a wolf hunt has been arranged by the citizens of that vicinity, to come off on December 31st, commencing at 10 o'clock a.m. — All lovers of sport are invited to be on hand and participate in the chase." A week later the editor asserted that the wolf hunt promised to be an "interesting affair" and it was hoped that several of the "pesky critters" would be captured. When the wolf hunt took place, however, only one was captured although the hunters succeeded in wounding several.