

Wild Game Everywhere

In 1857 Orion Clemens, the elder brother of Samuel L. Clemens, told the following story in his *Keokuk Directory and Business Mirror* for the year 1857:

"How far will I have to go to find buffalo?" inquired an eastern gentleman of the clerk of one of our hotels, one morning three or four years ago. It was soon after breakfast, and the querist was armed and equipped for a glorious hunt.

"About six hundred miles," replied the clerk.

"Bless me! I thought they were all about!" exclaimed the astonished sportsman.

Although buffalo had pretty well disappeared from Iowa by 1858, considerable game could be found on the prairies and more heavily wooded districts. The *Webster City Hamilton Freeman* of January 14, 1858, records a "large bear weighing 300 pounds" killed near Hardin in Allamakee County.

That hunting was once profitable is attested by the following from the *Hamilton Freeman* of December 21:

"Ed Wright" of Mason Township, Cerro Gordo Co., the pioneer of Winnebago and Worth counties, and one of most successful hunters and trappers of that region —

wears a suit of clothes made entirely from the skins of animals which have been slain by his hand. His coat, pants, vest, moccasins and mittens were made from the skins of deer — tanned by himself after the Indian mode — which fell before the deadly aim of his enormous old smooth bore; while an unfortunate coon that was beguiled into one of his traps furnished him with the raw material for a comfortable head gear. "Ed." used to slay hosts of bears, deer, elk, buffaloes, otters, beavers, &c., and the change that has been wrought in his hunting grounds by the emigration of the last two or three years, is anything but welcome to him. He sighs for a new country, and another spring will doubtless see him pack his "traps" and set his face toward the setting sun. — Success to "Ed." wherever he pitches his tent in the wild Northwest.

Meanwhile, small game hunting was popular with Iowans in 1858. On May 24 the *Davenport Daily Gazette* chronicled a "pigeon shooting match" in which the challengers were beaten "but the shooting, on both sides, was fair." The *Iowa City Republican* was informed in December that "one firm in this city last Saturday, packed and shipped to New York about thirty dozen prairie chickens. Several other firms were nearly as successful as the one referred to." The *Iowa Weekly Citizen* of Des Moines carried a story on December 29 that \$1,300 in prairie chickens and quails had been sent to New York by one Iowa City firm.

The destruction of quail in Iowa was so appalling that the *Hamilton Freeman* of December 10, 1858, importuned hunters not to shoot them. "In a few years, if they are not killed off," the editor

declared, "they will increase so rapidly as to become very plenty. At present, sportsmen, spare the quails!"

The ravage of wolves and coyotes was so great in pioneer Iowa that Governor Ralph P. Lowe approved an act on March 15, 1858, providing that the county judge was to allow \$1.50 on the scalp of each prairie wolf, lynx, or wild cat, and \$3.00 for the "large species of Wolves known as the Timber Wolf." The ferocity of these wolves was described in the Cedar Rapids *Democrat* and reprinted in the Dubuque *Daily Express and Herald* of January 10, 1858.

A few days since a party of gentlemen from this city, went out on the prairie to the west, to hunt prairie chickens and such other game as might come within range of their fowling pieces. Arriving on the hunting ground, they separated, leaving their horses in charge of one of their number, while the rest sought for game. In a short time they were alarmed at the sound of a gun in the direction of their horses, and on hastening to the spot found that a wolf had suddenly attacked one of them, a valuable animal, and injured him seriously. The wolf was still within range of their guns, but terror had seized upon the hunters, and they made a rapid flight homeward. The horse has since died from his injuries, and the wolf still wears his scalp. Can't some valiant hunter get his scalp, and thus secure the bounty?

Newspapers frequently called their readers' attention to circular wolf hunts. On January 14, 1858, the Davenport *Weekly Gazette* announced:

A grand circular wolf hunt is to come off at 9 o'clock A. M., on Saturday, January 16th, in Scott and Cedar counties, embracing the four townships of Liberty, Cleona, Farmington and Inland, where there are wolves in abundance. No guns will be permitted on the ground, and no dogs be allowed to run loose. A very friendly invitation is given to the citizens of Davenport, Muscatine, Tipton and Iowa City to be in attendance. Much sport is anticipated.

A week later the same editor chronicled the results of this widely-heralded wolf hunt:

GREAT CRY AND LITTLE WOOL — We advertised last week a great wolf hunt which was to come off at the outer edge of this county, last Saturday. At the appointed time a great crowd of folks assembled, numbering, it is estimated, about one thousand persons, and a great many of them mounted. They formed a circle of twelve miles, and centered five miles from Fulton. About twenty wolves were started, but the greater number were smart enough to get out of the ring. Only three half-starved looking chicken-thieves were killed. There was, however, a great deal of excitement, and lots of fun. Some of the young men were ambitious to exhibit their horsemanship, but their ambition as well as themselves, had a fall. A young man named Hollenbeck had his horse knocked over, breaking the animal's leg. The horse was afterwards killed. The young man was badly injured. A subscription was taken up to pay him for the loss of his horse, and we learn that enough was raised for the purpose. The hunt commenced at 10 o'clock A. M. and closed at 3 P. M.

The Des Moines *Iowa Citizen* of February 3, 1858, recorded a wolf hunt in Jasper County.

The mania for wolf hunting has infected Jasper. Three hundred and fifty persons in Newton resolved, at a meeting a few days since, to go into a general hunt. Dr. Gray was appointed President. He finds it easier to secure the presidency of a wolf society, than to be elected representative as the competitor of Col. Shelledy.

Those Iowans who lament the stringent laws on hunting in 1958 may be surprised to find that measures were needed and passed a century ago. Apparently the law of 1858 was not too clear for the Bloomfield *Democratic Clarion* facetiously observed:

It may not be generally known that by a law of the last General Assembly, it makes it unlawful to "Kill, sell, purchase, or have in possession, any deer, elk, wild turkey, prairie chicken, pheasant, or quail," between the first day of January and the 15th of August. This puts an embargo on all game shooting and traffic for this winter, for our citizens are a law abiding people, and always obey the mandate of the law making power. But there is one difficulty in obeying this law, provided anybody should be found to have any of this interdicted game in their possession on the 1st day of January. He cannot kill it, for that would be unlawful. He dare not sell it, for that subject him to be mulcted in damages, besides everybody is forbidden to purchase it. He cannot keep it, for the law says he shall not "have in possession." What can be done in such a case?

Although wild game was no longer a significant economic factor in Iowa it still afforded great sport and an easy change of diet for many pioneers.

WILLIAM J. PETERSEN