

Roasted Eggs

When the Indians with their simple tastes and requirements inhabited this country, the natural fauna and flora were not disturbed a great deal. Crude weapons and a disinclination to cultivate the soil prevented the red men from doing much harm to the wild life. The squaws might scratch up the ground in some unoccupied places and plant patches of corn, but nothing happened that really spoiled the face of the earth, from a naturalist's point of view.

But the white man came in much larger numbers and with more elaborate wants, so that the natural products of the country did not suffice. A variety of crops had to be raised and domestic animals introduced to furnish food and raiment for the larger and more exacting population. It became the first duty of every pioneer to destroy. Forests were cleared away to make room for the wheat fields. Many wild creatures were killed for human food, and the predatory animals and birds were destroyed to save the more productive domestic flocks and herds. The settler, being hard working and generally poor, had no time to contemplate the beauties of nature, to consider

the conservation of natural conditions. His greatest struggle was with nature; a conflict to reduce the wilderness and to prepare the soil for the production of the necessities of life.

My father's first duty after coming to Keokuk County, Iowa, in 1853, was of course to carve a farm home out of the wilderness. By hard and unceasing toil a log cabin had been erected and sufficient oak rails cut and split to fence the portion of the farm that had been cleared of trees and brush and converted into a garden and field. Inasmuch as all kinds of live stock were permitted to roam at large in those days, outside fences were imperative. At intervals of several years additional tracts were cleared and broken to enlarge this field, and the rail fences were correspondingly extended.

In the spring of 1870, father had finished clearing a tract of about ten acres for the breaking plow. All trees and bushes had been removed but patches of hazel brush, pussy willows, and briers covered most of the ground. Among the undergrowth was also a thick carpet of the last year's blue stem and other dead prairie grasses, interspersed with considerable growth of green grass, as the season was advanced. The man with the oxen and breaking outfit who had been engaged to turn under this tract of brush, willows, and sod

undertook the work on condition that it should be carefully burned over first, for the mat of grass and brush was too heavy for the capacity of his outfit.

On the day that father decided conditions were right to burn off the tract, he invited me (then five years old) to go with him and see the fireworks. As an exhibition of pyrotechnics this field of burning grass and brush was a grand success. Showers of crackling sparks rose to the sky and great clouds of black smoke ascended mountain high. All of a sudden and with a loud whir of wings that sounded like a burst of distant thunder, a large bird flew out of the smoke and disappeared over the hills. "That's a prairie chicken", said father. "It must have gotten too hot in there." At the same time we noticed a marsh hawk flying uneasily about over the burning area and occasionally uttering shrill screams of rage. Smaller birds were darting away in every direction.

When the fire had died down and the smoke had blown away we walked about over the charred and blackened turf. In the vicinity from which the prairie hen had appeared so suddenly we found her nest with nine nicely roasted eggs. Father examined one, found it to be fresh, and "done to a queen's taste". We had a rare feast

of roasted eggs on the "half shell" for dinner that day.

Before returning to our cabin, however, we walked over the remainder of the charred tract. The marsh hawk's nest contained five eggs which were also roasted brown, but we left them for the foxes and skunks. Further search revealed a quail's nest containing about a dozen eggs, burned black and so nearly destroyed that it was difficult to determine their number.

These were all the nests we found, but the thicket must have contained a large number of smaller nests with eggs or young birds which were completely annihilated. Fortunately prairie fires at that season of the year were not common, but the incident was a vivid demonstration of the tragedy of cultivation to the wild life of the prairie.

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