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Grasshopper Times

Northwestern Iowa has suffered much from the grasshoppers. The ravages of the Rocky Mountain locusts were almost continuous in O'Brien County from 1873 until 1879, though the devastation was much worse in some summers than in others. Thomas Barry, a victim of their invasions, relates his personal experiences in the following pages.

'Tis well I remember that beautiful June day when our future — which looked so bright — was so quickly blasted by an invasion of grasshoppers. It was Sunday morning: six of my neighbors had called for me to go with them to Hospers to attend church. There was no definite road, so we simply headed northwest and avoided the deepest slews. The sun was well up in the cloudless blue sky, causing the drops of dew to shine in the soft green grass mottled with prairie flowers. The tall grass by the side of the slew nodded to us as the wind blew over it. Meadow larks, like an orchestra of flutes, greeted us with their jubilant song from the tiptop of the tallest weeds as they accompanied us for long stretches. Then flashing the black crescents on their breasts, they flew away and others took up the relay with as clear a note.

The heavy sweet smell of bluejoint which filled the

air so dulled my senses that the German conversation of my companions seemed far away. A hearty laugh from the crowd brought me back to their presence, and turning to them I said, "Isn't this wonderful?" They looked at me rather blankly so I hesitated a little and ventured, "Schön, sehr schön, nicht wahr?" and spread my arms over the land. They all assented, "Ja", but one settler who had seen June prairies before edged up more closely and said, "Ja, schön, but you can't eat it." He nodded his head in emphasis and limped back to his place in the wagon.

When about half way to Hospers a large black cloud suddenly appeared high in the west from which came an ominous sound. The apparition moved directly toward us, its dark appearance became more and more terrifying, and the sound changed to a deep hum. At first we thought a cyclone was upon us. The oxen stopped and we all stared at each other mystified. "Der jüngste Tag", one man shouted and began to pray. The cloud broadened out and settled lower as it drew near: the noise became deafening. When it was directly over us it looked like a heavy storm of black flakes, the dark particles singling out and becoming more defined in shape as they descended. We heard the buzzing; we saw the shining wings, the long bodies, the legs. The grasshoppers — the scourge of the prairie — were upon us.

As Mike Roeder lashed his whip and turned the

oxen toward home, we nodded approval. He urged the animals into their swiftest gait — a wabbly trot. When they breathed loudly, he drew them into a slow, steady walk. The men spoke little: gloom settled upon the group. Again the meadow larks flew with us and plaintively sang, "O, do not give up hope."

When we pulled into my yard, the shiny brown pests already covered my patch of sod corn and the field of wheat. The entire garden was a dark moving mass and the tender young cottonwoods were brown. I was greatly relieved at the apparent composure of my wife as I saw her cutting down the clothes line. She had recovered from her fright and suggested that by swinging a rope we might be able to save some wheat. I figured it a useless procedure but we tied together all the rope we could find and, each taking an end, we swung it back and forth most of the day. We saved enough wheat for seed.

I do not think anyone but the old settlers themselves can ever realize the depredations caused by the hoppers. In O'Brien and surrounding counties they ate everything before them — small grain, corn, vegetables, bark and leaves of trees, the clothes on the line, and the tender shoots of grass that grew near the ground on the prairie. Some farmers cut the unripened grain. By harvest time there was little left to cut.

The settlers in northwest Iowa were for the most part people of limited means who had taken advan-

tage of the homestead or preëmption laws. Long and hard they had labored in anticipation of better times. They had endured all of the hardships and privations of pioneer life in the hope of realizing a substantial reward in the years of prosperity that were to follow. They had come into the new country practically empty-handed, depending entirely upon the crops from year to year: there was no surplus for emergencies. The early summer of seventy-three held out big promises. Implements were purchased, new granaries built, and lightning rod agents did a thriving business — on credit. The harvest would pay for it all. And then came the grasshoppers. To make matters worse a financial panic broke over the country in September.

The approach of winter found many of the farmers in dire need of clothing, fuel, and food. A convention was held in Fort Dodge and an appeal was made for donations to relieve the destitute in the stricken region. People from all parts of the country responded generously, and "grasshopper parties" for the benefit of the homesteaders became something of a fad.

When the General Assembly convened in January, Governor C. C. Carpenter recommended that the needs of the grasshopper victims should be investigated and some means provided for their relief. A legislative committee visited Sioux, O'Brien, and Osceola counties, met and interviewed hundreds of settlers, and found our local authorities totally un-

able to meet the situation. The shortage of seed grain was especially serious. Before the end of February a bill was passed which appropriated \$50,000 "for the purpose of furnishing the destitute in northwestern Iowa, suffering in consequence of the grasshopper raid of the summer of 1873, with such seed, grain, and vegetables as may be deemed necessary". Over \$36,000 of this money was used that spring and nearly two thousand people were aided. I did not take advantage of any of the relief that was offered because I had managed to save some seed and we were able to buy enough food and clothing.

During the late summer and early fall the hoppers had deposited cells of eggs in countless numbers in the cultivated land. Each cell contained about thirty eggs and was covered with a little soil. In the spring the eggs hatched and the ground seemed alive with queer little insects about one-fourth of an inch in length and possessing ravenous appetites. They seemed to be instinctively attracted toward the fields where the tender shoots of grain were making their appearance. The first sign of their ravages was a narrow strip along the side of a field where the grain or corn was missing. At first it was usually attributed to a balk in sowing but as it grew wider day by day the cause was soon apparent.

We experimented with every means conceivable to exterminate the pests. Smudging, burning the prairie, burning tar, digging ditches, using kerosene,

and harrowing the land infested with eggs were all tried with little success.

Again there was no harvest. Many settlers left the country disheartened and discouraged. Some did not wait to dispose of their land but loaded up and left, others sold for what they could get, while those who remained hoped for the next year. Many were in a pitiful condition. I sold our old home in Massachusetts and was saved some of the privations my neighbors suffered. Sharks and swindlers were plentiful and took advantage of the needy settlers by offering mortgages at high rates of interest — frequently charging two and one-half per cent a month. Only the coarsest food was available.

Every spring a new horde of grasshoppers was hatched. They moulted and began to eat as soon as green vegetation appeared. At times we were visited by migratory swarms which would stay a while and then all fly off again in a favorable wind. A grasshopper flight has been likened to “an immense snow-storm, extending from the ground to a height at which our visual organs perceive them only as minute, darting scintillations, leaving the imagination to picture them indefinite distances beyond. . . . On the horizon they often appear as a dust tornado, riding upon the wind like an ominous hail-storm, eddying and whirling about like the wild, dead leaves in an autumn storm”. When a change of temperature was encountered or a storm approached the grasshoppers descended. In alighting,

they circled in myriads about you, beating against everything animate or inanimate, driving into open doors and windows, heaping about your feet and around your buildings, while their jaws were constantly at work biting and testing all things in seeking what they could devour. Amid the incessant buzz that such a flight produced and in the presence of the inevitable destruction going on everywhere, one was bewildered and awed at the collective power of the ravaging host.

The noise made by one of the vast swarms of migratory grasshoppers when they were engaged in their work of destruction was much the same as the low crackling and rasping sound of a prairie fire swept along before a brisk wind — and the damage was scarcely less complete. The poet Robert Southey has vividly described the noise produced by a flight of these locusts :

Onward they come, a dark, continuous cloud
Of congregated myriads numberless,
The rushing of whose wings was as the sound
Of a broad river, headlong in its course
Plunged from a mountain summit, or the roar
Of a wild ocean in the autumn storm,
Shattering its billows on a shore of rocks!

Their flights sometimes darkened the sky and gave the settler an ominous feeling of disaster. One afternoon I was coming from Primghar in company with some neighbors when the largest and darkest cloud of hoppers we had ever seen passed between

us and the sun. The landscape grew hazy and things seemed so unreal we could hardly believe our senses. Daylight vanished, the air lost its warmth, and stars were visible. But after a while the cloud, carrying a tail like a comet, passed on. Sunlight and warmth returned, but it was several hours before we could shake off the terror that had seized us.

People in the East have often smiled incredulously at our statements that the grasshoppers stopped the trains on the railroads. At times the hordes of migratory hoppers accumulated on the track in such numbers that the oil from their crushed bodies made it necessary to sand the rails before the train could make the grade. J. M. Brainard, a prominent newspaper man in Iowa at that time, related that one day, well along in the afternoon, while he was on a trip to Council Bluffs, the train came to a standstill on the eastern slope of the divide near Arcadia. The sun was low and the air cool so that the hoppers had clustered upon the warm rails. The engineer was obliged to back the train and then make a rush for the top of the grade, liberally sanding the track as he did so. The same performance was repeated several times.

Some people, not living in the devastated section, treated the invasion as a joke. Much humorous literature was published concerning the hoppers. Menus were printed showing the variety of ways they could be served as food. It was said that really delicious soup could be made from the insects, while

fried in butter they tasted no better and no worse than shrimps. An agricultural house got out a card that had a picture of an enormous hopper sitting on a fence gazing at a field of wheat, and underneath were the words: "In this(s)wheat bye and bye". Fabulous yarns were told of the weird things the grasshoppers did.

As might be assumed, the loss of many harvests caused hard times. There was little money in circulation. Gopher pelts, on which there was a bounty of five cents, were a common medium of exchange. I used some cutlery that I received from Northampton in place of money. There was a good demand for my ware so I tramped the prairies with my sack on my back and visited surrounding towns.

The grasshoppers transformed the prairie into a barren world. Only the coarsest dry grass remained. Glossy brown hoppers shone everywhere in the sunlight, often piling up in their greed for any tender vegetation that might be found. I passed prairie shacks with the doors nailed shut; heard pitiful tales from settlers' families; saw hungry children, lean cattle, and a few cases of despair.

With all the desolation, hope never seemed to leave me. I was often lost in the fog and staid on the prairie all night. Thinking little of my health which I had been sent west to recover, I lay on the ground and watched the fog lift and the friendly stars come out. When dawn stole around me I arose, convinced that better times were in store for us.

In the summer of seventy-nine, when we all felt that we could not endure much longer, a favorable wind came before the hoppers had deposited their eggs. They arose and flew high seeking richer fields.

After the invasion was over, there was an influx of new settlers. Barbed wire did away with the free range and marked off our land like a checkerboard. A town sprang up near my place and the Chicago and Northwestern trains puffed through my pasture. A period of general prosperity began.

Of the seven old settlers who witnessed the coming of the grasshoppers on that memorable Sunday in June, 1873, six have gone to their reward. In the years that followed we found that we had the same ideals, though we spoke a different language.

JOSEPHINE BARRY DONOVAN