

A Plague of Locusts: Word Is Getting Out

This story begins in a South Dakota graveyard just outside a town that has, these days, far more ghosts than spirit. I was looking for a man's grave and surprised when I found it. The truth? -- there are far more dead in that cemetery than alive in town.

But I need to say something about grasshoppers. During the summer of 1873, gazillions swarmed up in a four-state swath. Alton, Iowa's first medical doctor, Dr. Gleysteen, thought to catch some winks in his garden one afternoon. When called for supper, he found himself amid a nightmare: "The grasshoppers had settled on my body three or four layers thick," he wrote. The garden was laid waste, he said: "After dinner, there was not a vestige of green left."

The *Sioux City Journal* told a Niobrara farmer's story: "He heard a strange noise behind him, which sounded like an approaching hail storm, and upon looking around he was horrified in seeing a dense cloud of grasshoppers within a few rods of him." Just chilled him, the *Journal* says. "Even his old desire to be cremated after death forsook him completely, for he was sure he would be buried a mile deep under the swarm of flying locusts."

It's not every day you get to use the word *denude*, but today I can. Consider the numbers-- 12.5 trillion Rocky Mountain locusts—and it's not difficult to imagine the devastation. They loved onions so ferociously that by their bad breath, you could smell hoardes a'comin' before they settled in. Asparagus to zinnias, corn to tobacco, they ate it all, then feasted on fruit for dessert. Right here in Siouxland, hoppers *denuded* the earth. That's the truth.

They sucked the salt from sweaty pitchforks and hammer handles, gorged on saddle horns, devoured wash hung out to dry, then burped once or twice and went after what little was still there on people's backsides.

All that munching sounded like prairie fire. Grasshopper gangs stopped trains on their tracks. Seriously.

Farm families tried to drown 'em, burn 'em, and smoke 'em away. Nothing worked. In 1874, ag historians claim hoppers munched 50 million in crops, 75 percent "of that year's total farm product value."

When chickens feasted on 'em, *they* became inedible. Turkeys likewise. They came like manna. A little honey could have turned all those pioneers into John the Baptists.

The destruction they wreaked was biblical in proportions. Some thought the swarming cloud of locusts another round of Ten Plagues. Others thought it the end of the world.

Thousands of families went back east, many of whom had just arrived.

Now we can return to a country cemetery out west in South Dakota, the grave of a one-time pastor of an Orange City church, a man named Dominie Stadt, whose grave sin was simply writing home. The good pastor, who reportedly was not dynamite from the pulpit, described those denuding hoppers to folks back in Michigan, described them in all their horrors, described it so well that those letters made it back to the Netherlands.

Here's the rub. Henry Hospers, the godfather of the Dutch colony in Orange City, caught wind of the Reverend's wagging tongue. In 1873, Hospers was into real estate and banking--into building community, *and not* losing it. Mr. Henry Hospers didn't just wield clout among Orange City Hollanders: he was clout. Poor Pastor Stadt was a better writer than preacher. The man had let out news Hospers wanted secret.

Once Hospers warned him to stop leaking horrors, it didn't take long for Pastor Stadt to recognize greater opportunities in Dakota Territory. He took the next wagon train west. And that's why the Reverend John Stadt is buried a couple of hours from here in the open fields of Douglas County, South Dakota.

And why, this week, at Tulip Time, if you drive up Albany Avenue, Orange City, on your right, just east of downtown, you'll see a sign announcing this fine old house, right there in the center of things, a house that once belonged to the honorable Henry Hospers.

If you drive by, just remember that denuding plague of hungry hoppers.