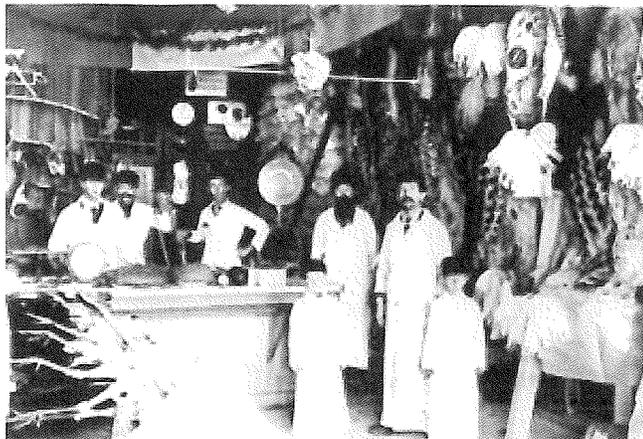


Area was once a 'hunter's paradise' — 12/9/2007



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Before Lancaster County's first settlers arrived, the area was termed a "wild, bleak prairie" - but a paradise for wild animals, with game of a varied nature amazingly abundant.

"Even the Indian could not keep it within due limits; it took immense numbers of the carnivorous animals to do this... at least 82 species of mammals are native to Nebraska."

Buffalo still grazed Lancaster's mixed grass prairie, and even today scant visible remnants of a buffalo run/cliff are visible near Denton.

As winter closed in, an interesting hunting scheme was to wait until there was snow over thin sheets of ice on streams, rivers or lakes. Then, when hunger-driven deer broke through the crust "a man or dog could [easily] kill them."

Originally, the salt flats north and west of today's Lincoln hosted "geese, brant, swans, ducks and pelicans — the hunter's paradise."

In 1864, when Lincoln was still the village of Lancaster, J.C.F. McKesson, nephew of physician and Lancaster pioneer John McKesson, visited his uncle and reported that "hunting and fishing was a real sport and only limited by the will and endurance of the hunter. All sorts of game were plentiful, and there were no restricted seasons on any of them."

As settlers filled the old portion of the basin, wild game, including antelope, deer, wildcats, coyote and wild turkeys, diminished, though in 1861 a few buffalo might still be seen, and that year it was said coyotes virtually "owned" the site of Lincoln.

A year after Lincoln became Nebraska's capital, the area around the city was still home to numerous deer and antelope, and although the buffalo had disappeared, prairie chickens were still abundant. Prairie wolves, or coyotes, were adapting to the settlement pattern, and though their cries filled the otherwise silent nights, about all they did "was steal chickens and small pigs."

In the 1870s, Adam Bax and his wife counted a herd of 62 antelope at the Franklin Heights section of Lincoln. By 1890, the city itself was virtually bereft of wildlife as it had been known.

One winter, when there was little to keep him busy, salt boiler John Gregory decided to rid the basin of excess wolves. His plan was to simply wrap fat around strychnine and scatter it about the area. The wolves greedily snapped up the fat and were quickly dispatched.

Gregory then skinned the dead animals, sold the pelts and stacked the frozen carcasses like cordwood. With the arrival of spring, a group of friendly Pawnee camped nearby, and when he saw them eyeing the wolves, Gregory rode down to warn them that they were poisoned. At first the Pawnee thought he was merely protecting the animals, but when they learned of the strychnine, they simply laughed, said they understood, cooked up a stew and consumed it with no ill effects.

Fish in both Oak and Salt creeks were also common, with black suckers and buffalo fish the most prevalent. One reporter said, "There were plenty of fish; great numbers were caught which would weigh 10 or 15 pounds each, and I have seen them tip the beam at 35 pounds."

Settlers, of course, were merely interested in a source of meat in most cases. A common source of meat for many was the prairie chicken, although J.W. Prey said his winter meat source "consisted almost entirely of venison and wild turkey." Deep snow made easy prey.

On Oct. 19, 1870, Bohanan Brothers meat market advertised 3,000 pounds of fresh buffalo meat for sale as well. Some hunters went in search of game and when antelope or deer evaded them, a luckless freighter's steer, which wandered away, might easily be "converted" to elk.

One of Lincoln's first game, hide and fur dealers was Simon Benadom, who bought from area farmers. When he returned from selling his stock in Chicago and New York during the winter of 1871-72, he discovered Rich & Oppenheimer's grocery store had bought \$2,000 worth of fur pelts in his absence. He quickly bought the store's excess stock and took it, along with 30,000 prairie chickens and quail, which he bought as well, back East for a quick sale.

From 1868 through 1870, Benadom personally killed 50 deer and 21 wolves along Salt Creek with the help of dogs. By the 1880s, the trade subsided as supplies dried up.

When a new high school was built at 15th and M streets in 1870, many parents feared sending students so far to the east of the city for fear they might be attacked when wolves came into Lincoln in search of food after snow covered the ground.

Just as we think Lincoln's wildlife is confined to squirrels and the occasional possum or raccoon, we read reports of deer at Rathbone Village on South Street or as far inland at 48th Street and Leighton Avenue. As civilized as we think the city is, we are still surrounded by remnants of the prolific game that once roamed Lancaster County in large numbers.

Man is in fact the intruder.

Historian Jim McKee, who still writes with a fountain pen, invites comments or questions. Write in care of the Journal Star or e-mail to jim@leebooksellers.com.