

still more misfortune. As one woman lamented, "All, or many, of the elements of nature seemed to work together to discipline the early Kansas settlers, they were not allowed to grow soft with ease and luxury, and as though hot winds, droughts and Indians were not enough, the grasshoppers came along and did their part."

During the first twenty years of its settlement, the Kansas frontier was relatively free from any sizable grasshopper infestation. Although grasshoppers had aggravated the farmer in relatively small numbers from time to time, they had not been a particularly serious problem. As a result, the pioneers were largely unprepared for the massive onslaught of the insects which would literally eat their way across the state in 1874. In fact, the infestation was so overwhelming and devastating that the year was later identified as the "Grasshopper Year."

In the beginning, 1874 seemed to have the makings of a very good year. "In the spring of 1874," wrote Mrs. Everett Rorzbauh, "the farmers began their farming with high hopes, some breaking the sod for sod corn, others plowing what had been broken the year before, sowing spring wheat, corn and cane, and with plenty of rain everyone was encouraged at the present. The neighbors would meet at some little one-room house and put in the day visiting and eating buffalo meat boiled, and cornbread and dried 'apple sass' that some relative back east had sent, and the men talking about the bumper crop they were going to have that year."

Although the summer had been typically hot and dry, the crops were growing well. By August, the wheat and the oats were mostly in the shock, and the lush green pasture grasses gave promise of fat and healthy herds of cattle. For the farmers evaluating their prospects, a plentiful harvest seemed assured. But their anticipation turned to despair as millions upon millions of grasshoppers blanketed the sky. "They looked like a great, white glistening cloud," recalled one bewildered pioneer, "for their wings caught the sunshine on them and made them look like a cloud of white vapor." swooping down on the fertile fields, the insects began a feast of destruction.

"August 1, 1874," explained Mary Lyon, "is a day that will always be remembered by the then inhabitants of Kansas. . . . For several days there had been quite a few hoppers around, but this day there was a haze in the air and the sun was veiled almost like Indian summer. They began, toward night, dropping to earth, and it seemed as if we were in a big snowstorm where the air was filled with enormous-size flakes."

Alighting to a depth of four inches or more, the grasshoppers covered every inch of ground, every plant and shrub. Tree limbs snapped under their weight, corn stalks bent to the ground, potato vines were mashed flat. Quickly and cleanly, these voracious pests devoured everything in their paths. No living plant could escape. Whole fields of wheat, corn and vegetables disappeared; trees and shrubs were completely denuded. Even turnips, tobacco and tansy vanished.

"When they came down," remembered Mary Roberts, "they struck the ground so hard it sounded almost like hail. Father had tried to get a start in fruit trees as soon as he could, and we had a greengage plum tree in our yard that was full of plums that were almost ripe, but it was thought too green to pick yet. We had to postpone dinner while 'all hands' gathered garden stuff and plums to save them. We picked every plum, as they would soon have all been devoured by the hoppers had we not done so."

"There was a watermelon patch in our garden and the melons were quite large and long. They were not ripe, so we could not save them, but by the evening of the second day they were all gone. I think we found one or two pieces of rind about the size of the palm of our hand in the whole patch. Such enormous appetites they had! In a few days they had eaten every green thing. They soon had every twig on every tree or bush eaten off and the trees were as bare as in midwinter."

Stunned by the continued onslaught and desperate to save what little remained, the pioneers grabbed whatever coverings they could find to shield their crops and shrubbery. Out came the bedsheets, blankets, quilts and shawls. Even old winter coats and greasy burlap sacks were ripped apart to spread over precious vegetables. Yet these coverings proved useless; the grasshoppers ate straight through the cloth or wormed their way underneath. As the settlers soon learned, these creatures would stop at nothing.

"They devoured every green thing but the prairie grass," continued Mary Lyon. "They ate the leaves and young twigs off our young fruit trees, and seemed to relish the green peaches on the trees, but left the pit hanging. They went from the corn fields as though they were in a great hurry, and there was nothing left but the roughest parts of the bare stalks. Our potatoes had to be dug and marketed to save them."

"I thought to save some of my garden by covering it with gunny sacks, but the hoppers regarded that as a huge joke, and enjoyed the awning thus provided, or if they could not get under, they ate their way through. The cabbage and lettuce disappeared the first afternoon;

by the next day they had eaten the onions. They had a neat way of eating onions. They devoured the tops, and then ate all of the onion from the inside, leaving the outer shell.

"The garden was soon devoured, and when all of these delicacies were gone, they ate the leaves from the fruit trees. They invaded our homes, and if our baking was not well guarded by being enclosed in wood or metal, we would find ourselves minus the substantial part of our meals; and on retiring to bed, we had to shake them out of the bedding, and were fortunate if we did not have to make a second raid before morning."

Within hours, no part of the countryside was left unscathed. Having eliminated all the crops and foliage, grasshoppers by the thousands moved on into barns and houses. Besides devouring the food left in cupboard, barrel and bin, they attacked anything made of wood, destroying kitchen utensils, furniture, fence boards and even the rough siding on cabins. Window curtains were left hanging in shreds, and the family's clothing was heartily consumed. Craving anything sweaty, the insects took a special liking to the handles of pitchforks and the harnesses of horses. Lumbering cattle stood by helplessly as the pests crawled all over their bodies, tickling their ears, eyes and nostrils. Young children screamed in terror as the creatures writhed through their hair and down their shirts. Men tied strings around their trouser cuffs to keep them from wriggling up their legs.

Lillie Marck's was a child of twelve when the grasshoppers scourged these prairies. In her memoirs, she relived the anguish of witnessing the unexpected devastation of her family's homestead. "Several days before the plague of grasshoppers, my father and his hired man, Jake, came home from the near-by village with tales of trains that could not start or stop because the tracks were slick with crushed grasshoppers. So thick were the grasshoppers that the sun could scarcely be seen.

"One morning, I had a chill and shook for hours. Mother made a pallet for me on the floor near the front door and covered me. I fell asleep. After a long rest, I awoke burning with fever. Mother had placed a wet cool towel over my face to reduce the fever. The sun was shining over my pallet and I felt so ill. Oh dear! Then Jake's voice rang loud and clear. 'Mrs. I Oh, Mrs. I They're comel They're comel The grasshoppers is here! You can jes' see the trees bein' ett up!' I raised the towel from my face and eyes, looked toward the sun. Grasshoppers by the millions in a solid mass filled the sky. A moving gray-green screen between the sun and earth.

"Riding his pony like the wind, father came home telling us more tales of destruction left in the path of the pests. They hit the house, the trees and picket fence. Father said, 'Go get your shawls, heavy dresses and quilts. We will cover the cabbage and celery beds. Perhaps we can save that much.' Celery was almost an unseen vegetable in that time and place—they wished to save it. They soon were busy spreading garments and coverings of all sorts over the vegetables.

"The hired man began to have ideas. Everyone was excited trying to stop the devastation. Bonfires began to burn thru the garden. 'Now I'll get some of them,' Jake said. Picking up a shovel, he ran thru the gate. Along the fence they were piled a foot deep or more, a moving struggling mass. Jake began to dig a trench outside the fence about two feet deep and the width of the shovel. Father gathered sticks and dead leaves. In a few minutes, the ditches were filled with grasshoppers, but they soon saw the fire covered and smothered by grasshoppers. Think of it, grasshoppers putting out a fire.

"Ella, my five-year-old sister, was shooting and beating them off the covered garden by means of a long branch someone had given her. I was ill and so excited over all of this battle and could only be up a few seconds at a time. Then all at once, Ella's voice rang out in fear. 'I'm on fire! Forgotten was my fever. I ran to the door and saw a flame going up the back of her dress. In less time that I can tell this, I ran to her and tore off her dress from the shoulders down. Then I turned and looked at the writhing mass of grasshoppers on the garments covering the vegetables and called, 'Mal Mal Come here! They are eating up your clothes!'"

At least the clothes the grasshoppers ate in the Marck's household were on the ground and not being worn. Adelheit Viets was not as lucky: "The storm of grasshoppers came one Sunday. I remember that I was wearing a dress of white with a green stripe. The grasshoppers settled on me and ate up every bit of green stripe in that dress before anything could be done about it."

For the beleaguered settlers, the devastation continued long after the grasshoppers had moved on. To their dismay, everything reeked with the taste and odor of the insects. The water in the ponds, streams and open wells turned brown with their excrement and became totally unfit for drinking by either the pigeons or their livestock. Bloating from consuming the locusts, the barnyard chickens, turkeys and hogs themselves tasted so strongly of grasshoppers that they were completely inedible.