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January 23, 2013

THIS WEEK: Iowa's Grasshopper Plague of 1873

BACKGROUND: FIFTEENTH IOWA GENERAL ASSEMBLY

The 15th General Assembly convened January 12 and adjourned March 19, 1874—a 67-day session.

The Senate had six Democratic members, 34 Republican members, and 10 Independent members. The House of Representatives had six Democratic members, 50 Republican members, and 44 Independent members. There were a total of 150 legislators in Iowa.

By 1874, the Capital had been relocated to Des Moines. The legislature had occupied the old Brick Capitol since 1858. Joseph Dysart was the Lieutenant Governor presiding in the Senate, and John Gear was Speaker of the House of Representatives. Iowa's population at the 1870 federal census had grown to 1,194,020.

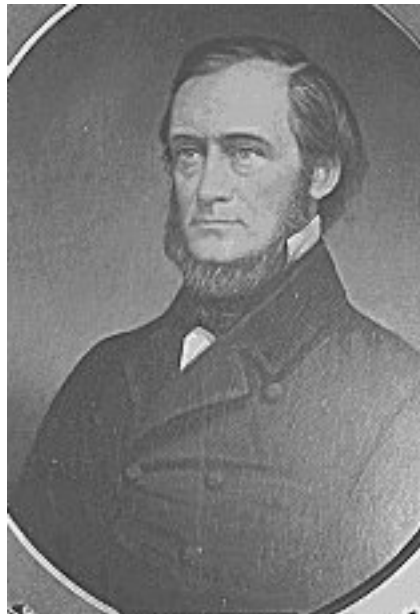
Both House and Senate journals from the 15th Iowa General Assembly include several references to assisting the destitution brought on by the 1874 plague of grasshoppers in Northwestern Iowa. Senator Perkins, from the Special Committee appointed to inquire into the reports of destitution in the northwestern counties of Iowa, submitted the following report, in part: "We have examined such evidence as is attainable here, and made such inquiries of parties interested in affording temporary relief as were to be met, and are

satisfied in our own minds that the case is one of sufficient importance to command the attention of the State."

Iowa's Grasshopper Plague of 1873

There are reports from committees, resolutions, Senate files 123 and 167, all concerning the destitute from the grasshopper plague in Northwestern Iowa. The legislature appropriated \$50,000 to aid the northwestern counties.

Although grasshoppers had been reported in the area for a few years, the mid 1870s were by far the most devastating for Iowa farmers in the northwestern part of the state. During the summer of 1873, swarms of grasshoppers infested the northwestern areas of Iowa. The devastation was not limited to Iowa. From Canada through Kansas, the grasshoppers fed, reproduced, and fed again. The first-hand accounts at the time explain the total devastation from the farm fields stripped of every grain and leaf, the bark of the fruit trees eaten away, and garden crops all but obliterated. The grasshoppers would infiltrate the well pumps rendering them useless. There were accounts of the insects swarming inside farmer's homes even eating the clothing within.



Nathaniel Baker
(b. 1818 – d. 1876)

Adjutant General Nathaniel Baker was instrumental in helping those destitute in Northwest Iowa. He arranged for coal by the railcar load. He asked for assistance from the beef producers and pork producers. He organized church groups, the Grange, and even enlisted the railroad to ship goods for free or at a greatly reduced rate. Baker knew the farmers would need food and clothing in addition to seeds for next year's crops. Baker had

a personal attachment to the farmers of that area, realizing that many had served in the Civil War. Throughout the grasshopper plagues, Baker referred to the farmers as "His Boys."

The farmers also worked hard to help themselves by inventing ways to destroy the grasshoppers. "The means employed are nets and sheet iron pans; the pans are about six feet long and constructed of the form of a dustpan; coal tar is put into the pan and two men drag it across the fields; bushels of pests are being destroyed daily, and the farmers feel confident they will be able to save their crops."

Another device was a wooden box 16 feet long, the back and ends about two feet deep, the front about two inches deep. Within the box was tin of the same proportions divided into four compartments by strips of tin placed sideways across the box. A small amount of kerosene was placed inside. With horses at either end, this device was pulled across the fields, and as the grasshoppers jumped in, they were killed instantly.



BURLINGTON HAWK - EYE.

Burlington, Iowa, June 5, 1873

Grass-hoppers appeared at Sioux City on Wednesday, in countless swarms coming from the south and passing over to the northward.



THE MONTICELLO EXPRESS.

Monticello, Iowa, June 6, 1873

I came near forgetting to tell you of our late terrible calamity. We are glad Rice and Miller were not here, for their families would never have looked upon their faces again. Grasshoppers were the retribution this time. On the 21st and 22d of May they came in such clouds that the sun was positively shaded, and the moon was in a manner turned into blood. The whole vast prairies were like a hive of bees at swarming time, and our time apparently had come. After looking around a few days, they all "lit out," still traveling eastward.



The Jefferson Bee.

Jefferson, Iowa, June 14, 1873

The grasshoppers have nearly all taken their departure from the region roundabout Sioux City. Beyond the "cleaning out" of gardens, they did but little damage. The *Cherokee Times* of the sixth said, "As we go to press the air is filled with millions of grasshoppers. The cloud is so vast that the sun seems to shine like through an Indian Summer fog."



The Upper Des Moines.

Algona, Iowa, June 18, 1873

The Grasshopper Scourge.— For two weeks past our western exchanges have been reporting the grasshoppers traveling toward the east. As the season advances, their march seems more rapid, and as their numbers increase, their destructiveness also increases. From Palo Alto county we learn that they are sweeping the grain fields with the besom of destruction. Monday morning of this week they had reached a point six miles west of Algona, and were steadily making their way toward this place. Frank Nieouhn informs us that five years ago, when these pests were so numerous and destructive, Barnet Devine, of Irvington, saved his crops by the following method, which we would advise farmers to try. It costs nothing but the labor and might save thousands of acres if tried in season. His plan of operation was this:

As soon as the hoppers made their appearance in his fields, he placed two boys, each on horseback, one hundred feet apart, with a light cord or line reaching from one to the other. In this way the boys rode through the grain fields, making regular paths and carrying the line so as to brush the grain, and disturb the hoppers, thus keeping them in constant motion. This was kept up for two days, and so diligently that the rascals could get no chance to eat. At the end of two days the intruders became disgusted and left those fields unharmed, while a brother of Mr. Devine, whose fields joined, lost his entire crop. A few boys thus employed for a day or two may save your crops. The experiment is worth a trial, at any rate.