

NATIVE ANIMALS

in

TREMPEALEAU COUNTY

BEARS:

A Bear Story: - Bear stories may become exciting from two causes; first, the number of bears; second, the number of men engaged in the chase. In the story about to be related, it was the number of men. On the roll is found the named of Wm. McDonah, John Boynton, John A. King, Geo. Webb, Wm. Sutcliffe, E. N. and Irene Trowbridge, and Hollister Wright.

E. N. Trowbridge relates the following as occurring in September, 1859. It was announced early in the morning that a bear had appeared on West Prairie. The people unanimously voted it a bold push in bruin to thus appear in a thickly settled country and turned out in large numbers to greet him with shot and bullet. Some were mounted on horses; some had dogs; others guns. To some of the party this was the first bear ever seen. It is said that sometimes the dogs chased the bear and sometimes the bear chased the dogs. There were five shotguns loaded with fine shot and one small-bore rifle, but the population of homos, hippos and canines was too great for guns to be safely used on the bear; besides one man was greatly concerned lest his dog be shot. The wonderful coolness and skill evinced by this lively party of bold hunters may be summed up in a phrase -- only the bear was killed.

Lyman McNitt states that bears were numerous in Trempealeau Valley. Clark Allen was asleep when one came through his garden and woke him up. One evening McNitt's wife Martha (nee Miss Erwin) drove one out of the corn field supposing it to be a calf, but was surprised to see it go under instead of over the fence, cow-fashion. In the morning following, the tracks disclosed the character of the beast. In 1858-59 three or four bears were sometimes seen in a day coming out of the woods. McNitt conjectures they were wandering in search of food as they were found feeding on acorns, hazelnuts, and other food of the oak openings.

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W. S. Hines furnishes the information that several bears were killed last year (1885) within six or eight miles of Osseo. They were never numerous in Beef River.

Julius Hensel states that he saw the Indians have seven bears at one time which they had killed in one day in the Trempealeau Valley. C. J. Cleveland speaks of bears as at one time "common in the wilds of this county". On one occasion he shot an enormous one from the top of a tree in Bear Cooley and was aided by Rufus and Nathan Wilbur in drawing it home in the night. It weighed nearly 400 pounds. Subsequently he shot another near the same place and says these two incidents gave rise to the name Bear Cooley -- said of Tamarack Valley, town of Trempealeau.

Mr. Russel Bowers of Albion states that bears were quite numerous in the early day and fed on burr oak acorns of the valley.

Hon. J. M. Barrett saw a bear on the outskirts of the village of Trempealeau in 1860.

BEAVERS:

Beavers were numerous in Trempealeau County in all the streams and were destructive of the trees growing on or near the banks. The operation was just as it would be to cut a tree down with a pair of sharpened pinchers.

Beaver Creek was famed for this animal. It was once my privilege when in company with B. E. Edwards of La Crosse, to see a beaver swim out from the shore when the creek was high, and cut a limb off a tag-alder bush and drag it ashore. This was just above the lower bridge at Galesville, and must have been in 1854. Later than this, when bridges had been made along Beaver Creek, a bridge made of poplar poles on a small branch near Geo. H. Smith's was eaten to the extent of some damage by these animals. This was a surprise in view of so much that had been told by trappers of this animal's extreme shyness.

W. S. Hines: "Beavers were numerous but disappeared ten or twelve years ago. They are now gone." Beef

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River Valley, 1886.

Galesville Transcript, January, 1862: "These animals (beavers) are still quite plentiful in this vicinity; they seldom show themselves to their enemies, but their works are seen all along the banks of Beaver Creek where they cut trees of considerable size. The ash seems to be a favorite, the twigs of which they cut and carry off for food. The stumps and trunks of the trees cut by them appear as if cut by a sharp gouge and the stump is generally left in form of an obtuse cone."

Four or five beavers were captured in the Trempealeau between Independence and Whitehall in 1885; so I was informed when there in 1886.

BUFFALOES:

Neill's History of Minnesota, has the following: "The last buffalo seen below St. Paul east of the Mississippi, was in 1832, in the neighborhood of Trempe a l'eau".

Dr. Bunnell, writing for the history of Winona County, says: "Beef Slough and Beef River were both called by the Sioux, Tah-ton-kah-wat-pah, and by the Winnebagoes, Te-chay-ne-chan-i-gah, because of the locality being the last resort of the buffalo east of the Mississippi, though some were seen on Trempealeau Prairie at a very late date."

Buffalo were mentioned as plentiful on the Chippewa River by Hennepin in 1680 and also near where he met Du Luth in the same year, probably, as would appear from Parkman, on the Trempealeau Prairie. La Salle in 1682 mentioned Ouisconsin as a river where the present chase of the buffalo is carried on. Carver, 1766-67 says the largest buffaloes were known to be found on the Chippewa.

DEER:

Deer were here as elsewhere. Young fawns were sometimes found in the grass. It was a peculiarity of the deer, in Wisconsin at least, that they would at times become numerous in a locality and then disappear for months. On Black River it was reported

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that they went into the region of Lake Flambeau to rear their young. But such was known not to be the uniform habit of the deer of the Mississippi region, though it is certain that they became scarce in mid-winter when they were supposed to go into the pines.

Mr. Russell Bowers states that he once shot a white deer in Beef River Valley in addition to a large number of the common kind. He says deer have been very scarce for the last five years. (Beef River Valley 1886.)

W. S. Hines says there were many deer when he came to Sumner in 1859 and till about 1872, since which time they have seldom been seen.

Galesville Transcript, 1862: "Two deer leisurely crossed W. A. Johnston's field at Galesville."

ELK:

About the year 1851 I was an occupant of a stage on the route from Eau Claire to Prairie du Chien, when the driver related with some excitement the story of his having seen that day a herd of fifteen elk in the Trempealeau Valley.

Mr. Russell Bowers killed nine elk in Trempealeau County, the last in or about 1866, believed by him to be the last seen in the county. He and his brother once counted one hundred and forty in one herd -- he thinks it was in 1858. Once he killed one that weighed six hundred pounds. He sold elk meat at 15¢ per pound, and once sold an entire carcass for \$25.

W. S. Hines relates: "I went from Osseo over to Elk Creek in 1859 and saw there fifty-three elk in a drove and I think there were several killed in Trempealeau Valley at that time. Have never seen or heard of any in the county since".

Galesville Transcript, January, 1862: "An elk was killed a few days since in the northern part of our county. Nine others were seen."

Lyman McNitt: "In the winter of 1857-58 I followed a herd of fifty-four elk four days, driving them into Buffalo County near Gilmanston, killing but two. Saw two, one at t

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Saw two, one at a time, two years later. I think Tom Bennett of Burnside saw the last elk in the Trempealeau Valley."

Hon. James M. Barrett: "In the winter of 1856-57 (Winter of the deep snow) we had much elk meat, supplied by Rob't Farrington. Cost four cents a pound. Venison the same, while beef was 12½¢".

Foxes were native and their holes were found in the hillsides. A few were trapped. I think they were less numerous than in the pine forests.

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Lyman McNitt: "Foxes and rabbits appeared at times in the Trempealeau Valley, but as the foxes increased, the rabbits disappeared."

The Wisconsin gopher was a slim, active, spotted squirrel-like animal, often sitting erect upon its haunches as if to attract attention while it showed its agility by darting into its burrow. This ever present animal of the open country, having a body about six inches long, was very destructive to recently planted corn, often taking a single row for long distances before or after the corn had started to grow. This animal is not the noted gopher of Missouri and Iowa, which has a pocket or pouch of white leather-like membrane on each side of the jaw, extending beyond the corners of the mouth, in which the animal is said to carry dirt out of its deep burrows. But the pocket gopher was native but not troublesome. Henry Towner states that the pocket gopher is common on the prairie about Trempealeau. There was also the gray gopher, much resembling the gray squirrel, but broader and having a somewhat shorter tail. Others were native, but soon disappeared.

PANTHERS:

I never in my pioneer experiences saw or directly heard of a panther in the northwest. Carver relates that he saw one, which he called the "Tiger of America", on an island in the Chippewa River and adds, "it is seldom to be met within this part of the world".

John H. Fonda tells a good hunter's story in connection

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with Mont Trempealeau. In 1839, while in the Menomonee Pineries, this gentleman procured a Mackinaw boat, and placed his family and goods in it and floated down the Chippewa and the Mississippi bound for Prairie du Chien. In the bow was a stove in which his wife did the cooking. The story we will allow Fonda to tell in his own way: "One day while the boat was floating lazily down with the current, opposite Trempealeau Mountain, my attention was called to an animal, pointed out by my wife. It was on a long, narrow bar or point of an island just below us, and appeared to be playing with some object, unconscious of our approach. I was not long in discovering that it was a large panther, and had made up my mind to shoot it, for at that time I had never killed one. So telling my wife to take the oar and direct the boat to a point nearest the beast, I stood in the bow ready to fire as soon as we had approached near enough. The panther kept dragging the object about, unmindful of the boat, until its keel grated on the sand within twenty feet of it. Just as the boat stopped I fired. The bullet pierced its vitals, and satisfying myself that it was dead, I got out to skin it, and found that one of the panther's paws was firmly locked in the jaws of a large hard-shelled turtle."

RABBITS:

Rabbits were numerous and the large white rabbit was frequent till the winter of the deep snow (1856-57), after which I never saw their tracks though the opportunities for observation were good for two years later. I cannot learn that the large variety has ever reappeared.

RACOONS:

Racoons were numerous on the wooded bottom lands. While accompanying a party on the peak of Mont Trempealeau in the fall of 1887, Politte (Paul) Grignon related that on the west side of the summit James Reed once killed within his hatchet seven racoons that came successively out of a crevice of the rocks just below, by reaching down and striking them on the head.

SQUIRRELS:

The common gray squirrel was found on the river bottoms; the small red squirrel (pine squirrel) was occasionally seen. I once found a den of the flying squirrel in the hollow of a tree, but I think

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they were scarce.

SKUNKS:

Skunks were numerous wherever there was woodland to shelter them and like the weasel were destructive to poultry.

WOLVES:

Wolves, particularly the small gray variety, were not uncommon. James Erwin reports killing several of the smaller kinds in different years and has seen the large gray kind in Trempealeau Valley. W. S. Hines says there are some wolves yet in Sumner.

J. B. Hoyt on the occasion of killing a pig saw six or more wolves pass near his house in 1855.

Rev. D. O. Van Slyke was followed by wolves while driving his ox-team from the Tamarack Creek to his home on the prairie, having his wife aboard, when he prepared to defend himself with a sled stake, but reached home while the brutes were gathering their force.

Thomas Seymour relates that when he was about 12 years old he encountered a wolf which was following a cow, but which, seeing him, forced him to take refuge on a stake-and-ridered fence on the farm now owned by Irwin Atwood. The wolf put its forefeet on the fence, then went away. This occurred about 1854.

WEASELS:

Weasels gave some trouble among the early poultry.

WILDCATS:

Wildcats were sometimes trapped. James Erwin killed six in one year. Wilson Sheeley trapped several about Galesville after the Civil war. The existing bounties for their destruction still brings occasional proof of their destruction to the county clerk.

WOODCHUCKS:

Woodchucks or ground-hogs were common and seem likely to remain.

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- - BIRDS - -

Of the numerous birds I can give place to a notice of only a few of the most prominent; the edible and the destructive variety.

Blackbirds were very destructive to the corn crops in the fall for several years after settlements began. They were hatched in great numbers along the Mississippi bottoms.

Eagles: Eagles are said to have built their nests in the bluffs of the Mississippi. A nest was reported in the papers to have been found in the Trempealeau range about the war time and an eagle caught by a Mr. Grant. I am told that a Mr. Hiram Brockway caught an eagle on Black River bottoms in 1867. Have been unable to learn the variety of these eagles.

Grouse; Feather-legged; a few.

Hawks: Various kinds.

Owls: Various kinds. The white has been killed.

Partridge: The drumming partridge or pheasant was heard in the woody places.

Pigeons: Dr. Bunnell relates that he saw a "pigeon roost" 45 miles long, the weight of birds and nests often breaking down oak limbs as big as a man's thigh. The roost commenced a little below Holmes' Landing (Fountain City) and extended down the river past Winona, Trempealeau and La Crosse along the bottoms and islands to a point below "Coon Slough" or near Winnesheik. It was during high water. The nests seemed to be mainly on the bottom-lands and on the oaks which were large and abundant before they were cut for logs.

These roosts, Mr. Bunnell believes, were of annual occurrence though perhaps of varying extent. The Indians carefully guarded them from disturbance by guns, that the birds might not fear to return the following season. The fat young birds were easily caught without disturbing the flocks, and were an important source of food.

The foregoing is condensed from Mr. Bunnell's verbal statement on solicitation. I can here add my testimony

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that I once passed a similar roost with a crew, while descending on a raft. As we entered Coon Slough we heard on our right, just as darkness set in, a strange confusion of sounds -- fluttering and squawking -- which continued all night long in the island woods as we were making two to three miles an hour. As morning was breaking, the sound gradually receded and we had passed below what was declared to be a pigeon roost about 20 miles long.

In the author's memory there was a pigeon colony extending from near Melrose in Jackson county to near Kilbourn City in Juneau County, having a length of 65 miles. Much of the wheat in the southern part of Trempealeau County was destroyed in the early stages of growth by these birds. I cannot, however, be sure of the dates of either of these reminiscences.

Prairie Chickens: Prairie Chickens or grouse were somewhat plentiful in an early day but were not so numerous as in Illinois and Iowa.

Quail: The quail was occasionally heard to enliven the echoes by his cheerful "bob-white", but the flocks were always few.

Robins: Native and numerous.

Turkeys: Carver mentions the wild turkey as inhabiting the region of Lake Pepin. James Reed said he had seen them on the bottoms just below La Crosse but no further north, though Turkey River, Iowa, was noted and named for them. Doubtless they were once on our river bottoms but early succumbed to firearms.

Wild Geese, Brants and Ducks: These made their flight southward in the fall and northward in the spring in great numbers, often alighting and tarrying along the rivers and ponds. The writer remembers the occurrence, but not the date, when wild geese badly damaged if they did not destroy a field of wheat between Gordon's Ferry and La Crosse. Dr. Bunnell tells the author that wild geese usually went in greatest numbers up Black River in their spring flights to the north, but a part adhered to the course of the Mississippi.

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- - FISHES - -

The delicious speckled brook trout were found in most, if not all, of the small streams. Their coverts were the alders and long grass which bent over the banks between and beneath which the limpid waters gurgled in their course from the clear spring of the sand stone rock towards the dark floods of the Black or the Mississippi Rivers.

The muscallonge and pickerel of occasional ten pounds weight inhabited the Mississippi and adjacent lakes. (Dr. Bunnell says there is this difference between the muscallonge and pickerel: "The pickerel has parallel spots running lengthwise of its body and lives in ponds. The muscallonge is heavier and stronger in build; has spots running diagonally across the body and of more projecting underjaw suggesting that of the bulldog's muzzle in form; habitates deep waters of the river channels. More gamey than the pickerel". Says that Webster's definition of the muscallonge is wrong.)

D. P. Gibson of Albion relates catching 114 trout in one day in 1858 or 59.

James Erwin: "Fished in the Trempealeau River where there were catfish and pickerel. One of the latter speared by me weighed 16½ lbs. There were also wall-eyed pike, suckers and 'red-horse'".

W. S. Hines: "Fish were once in considerable quantities in the Buffalo River but are scarce now." (1886)

- - REPTILES - -

Frogs were numerous in the ponds and streams; lizzards were scarce.

The large yellow rattle snakes were numerous and had dens in the dry crevices of the rocks in many parts of the county. A woman was bitten in the Little Tamarack and it is said, died from the effects. A son of Absolom Cary was bitten at an earlier period, but recovered.

Some Snake Stories:

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Any history of the country's settlement would be incomplete without its snake stories and Trempealeau County furnishes one of the most fertile fields for the origin of that class of literature. No country outside of Ireland is destitute of some capacity in this direction, but the dry creviced rocks of sandstone capped, by horizontal layers of magnesian limestone lying as a roof to turn off the rain, served to make this section of the upper Mississippi bluffs the paradise of that most formidable of northern reptiles, the "big yellow rattlesnake". Dr. Bunnell in the history of Winona County, relates the following:

"We asked Reed in reference to danger from rattlesnakes and were told that, to annoy him or retaliate for disparaging remarks he had made about a miserably poor dog having been used in named the "dog prairie" (Prairie du Chien), Dousman had retorted by calling his village site "the rattlesnake hills", "and the worst part of it is," said Reed, "he directs all his letters by steamboat in that way, and nervous people will scarcely land". Reed finally confessed that though he had been there but two years, having established himself in 1840, he had seen quite a number of rattlesnakes; but his hogs, he said, were fast exterminating them (Rev. T. G. Owen says he has seen hogs eat rattlesnakes) and he hoped they would soon disappear, for, said he, "old huter as I am, I step high in going through the ferns and grasses of the bluffs". The Winnebago name of the locality, Wakon-ne-shan-ah-ga, means "the place of rattlesnakes on the river".

James Reed, in the fall of 1851, related to the writer the following story: "On that step (pointing to the threshold of his smoke-house) I killed one of the largests rattlesnakes I ever say. My cattle were about my house, and I was inside when I was startled by a violent bellowing and confusion outside. On going out I observed the blood streaming from the nose of a yearling calf. Suspecting the cause in an instant, and procuring a cudgel, I began a search and found the rascal lying on that doorstep and killed him instantly. It was but a little while till the calf was dead." Reed prolonged his story by telling that a number of Indians were near and greatly agitated by what he had done, superstitiously believing that

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killing a rattlesnake would bring them bad luck, and that for a time he feared they would attempt to kill him. But he succeeded in appeasing them by arguing that the Great Spirit would not punish them for what was done by one who was not an Indian.

A story of the writer's experience will lead the reader out of the county but the digression is ventured on the plea that it is the story of a Trempealeau County settler. The writer was walking in the under-the-bluff trail from Gordon's Ferry to La Crosse in company with a young man, a stranger, when in the tall grass near Twelve Mile Creek an immense rattler lying across our path began with his accustomed slow march to entertain us with his music. We were very near his melody at first, but nimbly retired, under the impression that his "notes by distance" might be "made more sweet". Being near the stream, an alder grub was soon found on its banks, and the presence of the retiring reptile discovered by beating the grass till the rattle was again heard, whereupon the snake was killed. The companion, who had never seen or heard a snake of this kind before, was greatly agitated and could scarcely be induced to approach near enough to inspect the singular complication of fangs and saws with which the monster's mouth was armed. Soon after leaving the spot the stranger complained of sickness, which was at first accounted for by his fright, but a little later he alleged that his lips were swelling, which proved to be true, and in half an hour later both lips were badly swollen. He soon began to feel better again and the swelling retired, so that when La Crosse was reached, he was all right. The cause of that swelling is a mystery to the writer; but the stranger was confident that it was poison from the snake.

T. J. Seymour relates that he, with Samuel Noyes and Adelbart Batchelder, saw a great many rattlesnakes lying in groups on the side of the bluffs back of the present village of Trempealeau. The party promptly carried the news back to the village, but on returning, reinforced and prepared for attack, "could not find a snake". This illustrates the habit of this reptile, which I believe, from my own observations, will always escape from the presence of human beings when they have opportunity to do so. They are,

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however, slow of movement and on exposed ground will face and menace the foe. They rattle at every alarm and strike with their deadly fangs only through the instinct of defense.

Some massasoggers or small dark rattlesnakes were in Trempealeau Valley, states Mr. Lyman McNitt, but none of the large yellow variety.

The other notable snakes, fast perishing under the influence of the plow, are the "prairie bull" and "blow snake". These both have a close resemblance to the yellow rattlesnake in color, form size and movement, all being incapable of rapid flight for safety. Not exactly in the county, but in sight of the Trempealeau hills, at the upper end of Winona, Geo. W. Clark of that city, informs me that in his early breaking (Summer of 1852) at the foot of the bluff, a sickening stench arose from dead bull snakes. It was the habit of these snakes to lie in their holes (Mr. Clark thought these were gopher holes) with their heads near the surface while the team was passing, in just the position to be severed by the sharp plow-share. The blow snake, in the writer's experience, never attempted flight, but assumed the defensive when disturbed by filling itself with air and blowing with a prolonged, goose-like hiss. Stories about its blowing poison are probably without foundation.

Turtles: These existed in considerable variety. The common soft-shell turtles were in great quantities in the ponds. I was told when on Black River near Melrose by eye-witnesses that the Winnebagoes, when boiling down the sap of the sugar maple, were seen to throw living turtles into the kettles and cook them in the syrup. And yet the Indian is unrecognized as an economist!

- - THE INSECT PESTS - -

Mosquitoes: An Ohio man owned land near Black River on Decora's Prairie, and in the early settlement, brought on his family. They stayed one night. The good wife and mother, with swollen cheeks and uneven hands, bequeathed the parting words that she could not be induced to remain in such torment as

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the mosquitoes had inflicted. The writer once inquired of Charles Utter regarding the time of settlement of a family east of Trempealeau. Utter was sure it was in summer, for he remembered the mosquitoes drove the family away from the premises, to find shelter in Trempealeau. Boatmen camped on the banks of Black River used to try to be jolly in their suffering by telling how they expected to learn when daylight came by thrusting a pole through the cloud of mosquitoes above them, and peeping quickly through the hole after jerking the pole away. The "boys" of these merry crews, however, failed to estimate the thickness of the stratum, for the writer on one occasion of failing to make his points in travel was compelled to seek a lone encampment -- fireless because parties were then out hunting Winnebago Indians for removal -- hoping to avoid mosquitoes, sought a solitary peak that loomed far above the surrounding land. Even there the stilted tormentors tuned their familiar "song" in concert with a duet of howling but distant wolves, but only the mosquitoes helped themselves to my blood. This occurred in 1848 in Ia Crosse County within the limits of which I had passed a prior experience on a high part of the sandy prairie above Onalaska, a mile at least from water, where mosquitoes of small size seemed to rise from the sand and meagre grass in myriads. That was, however, in the warm, wet summer of 1844. It will be observed that these two experiences of special test of mosquito omnipresence were outside our county. Yet old settlers may be trusted to affirm similar experiences as possible within our county. The mirthful reader may however liken the mosquito stories of this region to the ague "yarns" of Illinois. "Not much right around hyar, but powerful bad in t'other settlements". Where the mosquitoes of the high hills and dry sand prairies were bred, is to this day a mystery with the writer. They rapidly diminished as settlements progressed. Hardwood smoke was the usual protection against them, though grease rubbed on the exposed skin was effectual and was used by the Indians. I knew a woodsman of the pinery who carried bacon rind to his work with which to annoint both himself and his cross-cut saw. "Mosquito bars" were in use to surround beds, but the door and window "screens" were a later device. It is worthy of remark that the mosquito bites do not produce swellings

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upon persons who have long been exposed to them, but they do not cease to produce considerable pain.

Horsefly and Deerfly: The horsefly and deerfly were formidable plagues to beasts, and the settlers did not always escape. The pinerymen used to apply decoctions of butternut leaves to their animals and sometimes buy fish-oil with which to protect the oxen. The large black fly would produce sores in the poor animals' skins and then crowd upon that sore, increasing its size until some kind hand would apply a protecting ointment. I knew of an instance on Black River where chickens were introduced, after which, when the oxen (usually running free in summer) would come to the house to lie down (and I suspect they learned to come on purpose) these chickens would mount their sides and run all over them in quest of the flies which when once fastened on their victims, were easily secured by the fowls. I remember of once suffering terribly from attacks of the deerfly (which so annoy horses' ears) when travelling afoot among the small pines of the La Crosse River near Sparta. I mention these experiences in near localities, believing the conditions were similar in our own county, but in which I was never similarly exposed to the necessity of learning such memorable lessons.

A large kind of gnat, called the "buffalo gnat" appeared, of short duration, in spring and fall. Unlike the mosquito they would seek shelter behind the ears and under the collar and wristbands and cling till filled or killed. Their attacks when they did come were even more distracting and voracious than that of the mosquito. The writer's main experience with these pests was on Black River, but they did not neglect him till settled in this county for several years. Another annoyance more persistent in the pine woods, and present with some mitigation in this county, was another kind of gnat, so small as to be, singly, almost invisible; but black, when seen as they alighted in quantities. These made their attacks at all points, getting into the hair and under the clothes in addition to covering the face and hair. Their bites turned the skin red as if blistered and the sensation was rather a burn

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than an itch. If remembered rightly, they came in June, and remained some weeks. The pinerymen had two names for them, the "midges" and the "punkies". Fleas were indigenous and active in sandy places. The housefly was native everywhere.

From the files of Judge H. A. Anderson, House of
Memories, Whitehall

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