



passing of the prairie chicken

In my time back on Old Orchard Farm there used to be more wild prairie chickens than chickens of tame breeds. Nowadays I know a lot of people who have never seen a prairie chicken, for they have been gone from Iowa for many years.

But they used to be plentiful. It was one of the commonest things in the world to run onto a prairie

chicken nest full of eggs. Like snipes, and many other birds, the mother hen tries to fool us to prevent us from finding her nest. Many times as I walked along in the grass, a prairie chicken hen would flutter right from under my feet with all the noise she could make, and fall on her side and squabble around in the grass just like she was crippled and could barely fly at all. I would run over intending to capture her alive, and just before I got my hands on her she would give a flounce and light fifteen or twenty feet away.

I would be right after her, expecting this time to make the capture. But she would be too quick for me, and away she would flutter — maybe hitting the ground several times before she came down to stay. Then I was sure she was tuckered out, and would run with all my might to pick her up. But when I was about three steps from her she would give two or three awkward flops and rise, maybe four or five feet from the ground, and fall forty or fifty yards away. By this means she would fool along with me for a good long way, and then fly off as fine as any prairie chicken you ever saw. It was a way they had of getting a person coaxed from their nests so that you never could find them again.

A prairie chicken hatches out a covey of fifteen or so young ones, and they are the cutest little things you ever saw, except young quails. Prairie chickens were used to the out of doors, and had good luck raising their young, so they multiplied to beat anything. Every grain field of forty acres in the country had a drove or two of chickens in it. All summer long you didn't see much

of them, only by chance, for they lived mostly in the corn fields and weed patches. But after the small grain had been cut and shocked, they had a habit of coming out there to feed in the cool of the evening.

By August they were half grown, and the men used to go out after supper and hunt them. Two men would generally hunt together to cover more ground. Those chickens were mighty sly, and without a good hunting dog to find them you might just as well have stayed at home. During my first experience on this kind of a hunt I was too young to shoot a gun, so I just went along to carry the game.

John Cappes came over to our house and joined my big brother Joe and me for the hunt. John had borrowed a fine setter from a German named Henry Rawhert who had lived in this country only a short time and could just scarcely talk our language. But his dog seemed to understand everything the boys said to her.

Joe had a double barreled breech loader he had bought from Rawhert, who had set up a gunsmith shop on his farm down the lane. The left barrel was choke-bored and was made to get the game if you missed with the right barrel. That choke-bored barrel shot mighty close, and we had to be careful not to use it first or we might blow the game to pieces. Joe got a set of tools for reloading the brass shells, and these shells, when they were empty, had a smell about them that I liked better than almost any other smell. I used to help him reload on rainy days, by passing him the powder jar, or the shot sack, or the box of caps. I fully expected that some

day he would let me shoot that wonderful gun. He did, too.

Early that evening of my first hunt we went out to the back oats field. The boys spread out about fifty feet apart, a short distance from the edge of the corn. The oats stubble was about eight inches high but many weeds had grown up since harvest and stuck up about a foot above the stubble in places. The dog was turned loose and went on ahead and away off to each side, and I trailed along behind.

We sauntered along that way for as much as a hundred yards or so, without finding anything to shoot. John Capps allowed maybe it was a little too early in the evening. Joe was just starting to tell about a fine flock of young chickens he had seen in that very field earlier in the season when the setter stopped running, crouched down pretty low, and went crawling forward at a snail's pace.

I thought maybe she was getting tired or something. But the boys cocked their guns and got ready, for they said the dog was "setting game." It was all Greek to me. I had supposed that hunting dogs were used to catch game by running it down, like our blue dog did rabbits.

The setter stopped dead still, kind of crouched down, with her tail sticking out straight as a ramrod and one front foot lifted up. The boys walked a few steps closer. Then the setter went a little farther ahead, just creeping along. Then she came to a dead stop and wouldn't move a peg. We all slipped up to within a half dozen

steps of her, and still she stood like she was paralyzed.

Then Joe gave her the word to "put it up." That meant, I soon saw, to scare the chicken out of the stubble so he could shoot. When he said this, that setter gave a forward spring, and out flew a fine young chicken. It flew up on John Capps' side, so he shot, missing with the first barrel but bringing the chicken down with the second. I supposed that the hunt was all over, as no other birds flew up — and if there were any more there, I thought the crack of that gun would stampede them. But the dog stood like she was tied.

Joe motioned for the dog to go ahead, and she crept a few steps forward, while we all stood still and watched. Within ten seconds she came to another dead stop, and Joe again gave her the word. She sprang in and another chicken flew up. Joe downed it with his right barrel. Just then two other chickens came out of the stubble at the same time and the boys had a shot together. Joe missed with his right barrel, and then, taking plenty of time, he let that choke-bored barrel loose. The chicken fell seventy yards away.

That blessed setter dog worked back and forth all over that stubble, and one by one scared up about sixteen prairie chickens. It was a covey of an old hen and her brood. I don't remember how many the boys shot, but at least ten or eleven.

My first thought after four or five had been killed was what a job it was going to be to find all those dead chickens scattered all over the place for a hundred yards around. But to my surprise the dog did the work. As

soon as the shooting was all over, Joe sent the setter out to bring in the game. The boys called this "retrieving." What surprised me was that the setter never stirred to go until she was told. She would go surging off, fast as she could run. I wouldn't think she could find anything at that pace, but all at once she would stick her nose down and bring up a chicken. Laying it down at our feet she would go at it again, 'til she had the last one of those chickens piled up. I thought that the German who had trained the dog must be a pretty smart fellow.

Some August evenings — especially if the weather was a little drizzly — we could hear guns booming in all directions, as the farmers brought down young prairie chickens by the hundreds. They never killed more than they wanted to eat, and we never could see that there were any fewer chickens the next year. Businessmen from Burlington, Mediapolis, and Morning Sun used to come out to hunt, for every farmer allowed hunting on his farm. There seemed to be no end of chickens.

But it was in the fall of the year that we saw real flocks of prairie chickens. When frost came and the fodder was shocked, with winter just around the corner, many coveys of prairie chickens joined forces. I have seen as many as a thousand in one flock. They sometimes came early in the morning and alighted on our barn, in the apple trees, and even on our house. A big walnut tree down in the field used to be a wonderful place for the chickens to light. I have seen that big

tree so full of chickens that I couldn't see through it, and hundreds more would be on the ground.

Sometimes when we were shucking corn a great flock would come flying over and we could hear the whistling of their wings and see the stripes on their necks. They usually flew about fifteen or twenty feet above the ground and always in a straight line. It was a pretty sight in the dead of winter to happen onto a great flock of prairie chickens sitting on the snow and talking to one another in chicken language. I have seen whole hillsides literally covered with them.

Early in the spring they disbanded as great flocks and simmered down to little bunches, sometimes only two or three. During this season we heard them sing, if that is what to call it. It wasn't really much of a song, but sounded a whole lot like "Bum, bum, boo." Along between sundown and dark, in April or early May, we could hear them out in the pasture somewhere, "Bum, bum, boo; bum, bum, boo." And they would keep that up until after dark. Once I happened to be near enough a covey to discover that it was the roosters who sang. They seemed to swell up around the neck, put their heads back and do their "bum-booing" much like a tame rooster crows.

Several things contributed to wiping out the prairie chicken from the country fields. One thing was the passing of wild prairie grass, which was their natural home. Another was the improvement in guns. As long as the farmers had to load their guns by hand — from the muzzle — right out in the field, there wasn't a

great deal of danger to the chickens. But when the time came that everybody had a breech loader or two, it was just too bad for all game birds.

The telegraph and telephone wires killed thousands. These wires were strung on poles about exactly the height that prairie chickens flew, and the poor things would fly right into them and break their necks. We boys found this out once when we went with Pap to a sale over in the Dode Miner neighborhood. Dode's boy took us out along the railroad and we found three or four dead prairie chickens lying right under the telegraph wires. Mother never would cook any of them for us, for she said you couldn't tell how long they had been dead. But we liked to find them anyhow.

Boys are not as particular about a lot of things as grown up people are. I remember once when a passel of us were exploring a marshy place that we found five or six big green frogs, about six inches long, sitting right on the edge of a pool. The water wasn't over a couple of inches deep, so we took after those frogs and caught them. Then one of the boys suggested that we kill them and skin them like they were Indians.

It was a pretty easy job to skin them. The meat was the whitest, prettiest looking meat you ever saw — looked good enough to eat. So we sent one of the boys back to his house to steal some matches and salt, built a fire, cooked those frogs' hind legs, and ate them. We all agreed frog legs were some of the finest meat we had ever tasted. We felt mighty guilty about it at the time and wouldn't have let the folks know about it for the

world. But the time came when the same kind of frog legs would bring a quarter apiece in any good hotel.

We fried two ground squirrels once, on an old iron clock face fixed over some rocks, and they weren't so bad. One time Allen Lee shot a great big hawk over by his apple orchard, and we got it and cooked it. The meat was good enough, what there was of it, but awfully stringy and tough. Maybe we didn't get it cooked as much as it should have been, but it was nearly black when we ate it.

Once when we were coming home from school past Allen Lee's place we saw a rabbit sitting in a little brush heap at the lower end of his apple orchard. We sidled off, so as not to scare it, and ran back and told Allan about it. He got out his shotgun and came along with us, walking hunched away over with his knees bent forward long before we got near the rabbit. He crept to within two feet of the little brush pile, stuck the muzzle of that gun into it and whanged away.

When the smoke had cleared away we dug into the brush for our game, but all we could find of that rabbit was his ears, two paws, and some fur. That big charge, at so close range, had blown the poor bunnie into the next township, I reckon — maybe clear over as far as the insane asylum at Mount Pleasant.

That old asylum stood over across the prairie fifteen miles away. It spread out over several acres of ground and we could see the black smoke rolling out of its brick chimney when we looked over that way. People claimed it was full of crazy folks, and warned that if any

of them ever got loose it would be a sorry day for us. With that great big solemn looking asylum looming up to the southwest, we never lacked something to tone us down if we ever got too gay.

When Pap took us over there to the asylum one Sunday, we found out that it wasn't such a bad place after all. The yard covered ten acres and was mowed as level as a floor. There was a pipe spouting up water in the middle of a little pond, and five or six geese jabbering around it. There were several benches out under the tall trees, and people were resting in them.

There were big rooms inside, and offices, and desks, and a place to register your name. A stairway six feet wide wound up and around to the upstairs, where I suppose the bedrooms were. After that I had a different feeling about the asylum.

At Fort Madison, another town only about forty miles from our house, there was a penitentiary. I could never muster up any notion of going down there, though. We never understood why our part of the state had both of these institutions so close together. Maybe we were more wicked and crazier than the rest of the state, but I doubt it.

The Mississippi River was only eighteen miles east of us, and in wet times, got to be several miles wide. It was one of the grandest sights you ever saw. When some smart aleck came along and got to bragging about the wonders of his part of the country, we used to be comforted by *our* Fort Madison penitentiary, the Mount Pleasant insane asylum and the Mississippi River.