

HISTORY OF THE JACKRABBIT DRIVES

Finney County, Kansas

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** Additional information added about certain people mentioned in this story*

In the early 1880s, there were a few rabbits in Finney County, Kansas, but they served as food for the early settlers. As the county became more thickly settled and the settlers began to grow more crops, the jackrabbits increased in numbers.

There were two kinds of jackrabbits, the whitetail and the black-tail. The black-tail was more numerous than the whitetail, but the whitetail was larger and could run much faster. As the county became more settled, however, the whitetail seemed to grow scarce, and the black-tail seemed to thrive, becoming a pest to the county. Some of the farmers were able to hunt the rabbits and use them for hog feed.

In the winter of 1917, a group of citizens and the National Guard, twenty on each side, held the first rabbit hunt in Finney County. They were organized and under two captains. The losing side was required to give a nice supper to the winning side. The citizens of the area won, and the National Guard had to provide the supper. The hunt brought forth 1,206 rabbits, one badger, and one eagle, all killed by shotguns in a single day.

In the latter part of the 1920s, rabbit pelts became reasonably valuable, as rabbit fur was a popular item added to hats and other things. Farmers began to take an interest in the sale of rabbit pelts.

In the 1920s, western Kansas counties furnished poison to the farmers to help rid the Jackrabbits. Maize and Kaffir Corn heads were soaked in a solution of this poison and put in snowdrifts at night. In the morning, the farmers gathered the poisoned corn and maize so the livestock could not get ahold of the poison. Thousands of rabbits were killed, but with the coming of the depression, the sale of hides fell off, and the farmers lost interest in getting rid of the rabbits for a while.

The rabbits were allowed to multiply, and by 1934 and 1935, they had returned in vast numbers. Wheat and other crops were the chief items in the feeding of these numerous pests. Because of this, the bunnies grew enormous, but not quite as massive as the rabbits shown in various "fake pictures" at that time. Trick photography was how they made the larger than life photos. One particular picture was of a man holding a gun and standing beside a deer-sized rabbit to indicate that he had just shot the rabbit.



TRICK PHOTOGRAPHY POSTCARD

At first, groups of men would go out on regular hunts and shoot the bunnies, but with the increasing volume of rabbits, a faster method had to be devised. When they were gunning for them, it was an excellent sport for any person who liked hunting. One group, particularly the Garden City high school men teachers, formed two groups under two names and took the day off to hunt rabbits. They brought back the rabbits, leaving them in a specific spot for the benefit of the poor. The late Mr. Loyal E. Busenbark*, the Garden City Daily News publisher, furnished a place for them to leave the rabbits. He had it fixed so that anyone who wanted them might be able to get them fresh, killed that same day. When young and tender, Jackrabbits are delicious for those who care for the taste of rabbit meat. If prepared a few days later, it is overly tough and very unsavory. Most of the time, the rabbits feed on specific vegetables, making the meat bitter in flavor. Baking it in saltwater helps to take out the bitter taste. Groups would bring in hundreds of Jackrabbits every day. Some people would get them as fresh meat for their hogs, chickens, and even domestic pets.

Again, the people tried rabbit poison, but it was not a practical method as it left the rabbits to rot in the fields, and there was always the danger of the cattle getting ahold of it. Hunting with guns was not fast enough to suit the enraged crop-losing farmers, so the idea of the rabbit drives was conceived. There has been a lot of criticism as to the brutality of these drives, but they did the job of cleaning out the rabbits. Those who witnessed a rabbit drive will probably never forget the sight. Hundreds of people participated in them. At one of the rabbit drives, there were around 5,000 people there. Town people, as well as country people, would meet at these drives. Everyone who wished to participate would form a circle of ten or fifteen miles in circumference around a largely built corral. They would then walk, working on getting the rabbits in

front of them and into the slaughter pen. This pen was a huge one usually made of a snow fence with a chute in front that led to a more or less round pen. People from all parts of the rabbit-infested district would gather to get rid of the rabbits. Just watching the group, made up of hundreds of boys, men, and women from all walks and ages, driving the large, long-legged, high-jumping bunnies was sport enough. Once they got them inside the pen, it closed, and then they would begin a wholesale slaughter from which few bunnies escaped. The participants, not permitted to use guns, used mostly rocks and clubs. Within a short time, the pen was transformed into a kicking, dying, bloody mass of rabbits. Very few participants escaped without being blood-spattered.



“Weapons for rabbit destruction were mostly rocks and clubs”

After the drive was over, they would load the rabbits into trucks and bring them to town. Truckloads were also sent out east so the rabbits could be sold while fresh.

The rabbit drives, brutal as they sounded, were a sure means of ridding the Western Kansas plains of these pests. During one of those drives, the counties Finney and Scott together killed about 10,000 rabbits.

Additional Information

LOYAL E. BUSENBARK

LOYAL EMANUEL BUSENBARK, the son of Dow Busenbark (1853-1925) and Olive A. Coxen (1855-1923) was born on 23 Mar 1883 in Kansas. He was the oldest of eight children in the family and all were engaged in the newspaper business at one time. His father, Dow was a well known

Kansas newspaperman. For eight years, Loyal was the publisher of the "Garden City News" and was the publisher of other newspapers in several other cities in Kansas, Nebraska, and Oklahoma.

Loyal was married to **JENNIE PARSONAGE** (1882-1971), daughter of Philip H. Parsonage (1846-1933) and Mary M. Sutherland (1850-1923). Loyal and Jennie had one daughter named **BEATA (BUSENBARK) BENTLEY** (1910-1951).

Loyal Busenbark died of a heart attack on 31 Oct 1936 in a Garden City hotel where they had been living at the time. Burial was in Eskridge, Wabaunsee County, Kansas, at the Eskridge Cemetery.