

PRAIRIE DOG TOWN

Hamilton County, Kansas

Written by Ruth Ausbun

Reference: Mr. Plunkett, Coolidge, Kansas

Additional information provided by Kirk Coats (2024)

Nine miles north of Coolidge on section 3, Range 43, and Township 23, is perhaps located one of the largest Prairie Dog towns in this part of the country. About a one-half mile west of Coolidge, until you reach the first graded road, then going north, is where you turn to go to the Prairie Dog Town. It covers about 160 acres of ground. It has been there for many, many years. Several others are seen before you reach that particular one, but they do not have as many Prairie Dogs. The Agriculture College has distributed poison to this pest of the farmers, killing many of them. It is also believed that a good many of them left for other places. The drought, burnt grass, and unsuccessful crops have caused the Prairie Dogs to starve to death. In the early days when the country was first being settled, people could see hundreds and hundreds of them as they drove through the pastures. They could see Prairie Dogs jumping up and barking. They are getting less numerous every day.

There is also another Prairie Dog town in Coolidge. This one is located about two blocks north of the Shell Gas Station on the left side of the road. It covers approximately 5 acres. At almost any hour of the day, a Prairie Dog can be seen jumping and yelping around its holes. One other interesting fact about these towns is that there are always owls to be seen flipping about and living near the Prairie Dog holes. *Today, burrowing owls continue to live in Prairie Dog burrows.*

The "Prairie Dog" got its name because of the yelping that sounds like the bark of a dog. They are found in colonies and burrow tunnels beneath the ground. Thousands of these homes are so deep down and burrowed so close together that it is unsafe for horses. Over the burrows are mounds of earth that resemble a town of miniature huts. The Prairie Dogs are busy little animals, rushing from burrow to burrow all day.

The land where the Prairie Dogs build their homes is usually ruined, and sometimes the land cannot be plowed due to the deep tunnels under the ground and the large mounds of dirt. Even if the land was not damaged and a plow could be used, the Prairie Dogs eat up the crops and destroy them. So it might be said that land that is inhabited by Prairie Dogs is unfit for use.

Their cleverly made homes are so numerous that they often cover 200 acres of ground. Any signs of trouble at the entrances, the Prairie Dog makes the sound of a sharp "tweet, tweet" that lets the whole colony know.

Many people have tried to kill the Prairie Dogs by pumping gas into the holes. It does work sometimes, but where they are so numerous, it is impossible to get rid of them all.

They are perhaps the most destructive of all other small animals. The Prairie Dog has exceptionally sharp and powerful teeth and belongs to the rodent family.

There are other little animals belonging to the same family. The Agouti is sort of a large long-legged guinea pig, which does good when it eats weeds but does great harm in sugar plantations. The Capybara is the largest of the rodent family. Its fat body is so thick that it nearly touches the ground. It is clumsy on land but swims beautifully.

Viscachas live in colonies in South America and decorate their homes with bones and bright stones. The pocket gopher gets its name from possessing two little pockets, one on each side of its face. In these, it can store food until it has time to eat it. Of all these mentioned, the agouti and the Prairie Dog are the most destructive.

The Prairie Dogs live together in their little villages underground. In order that this will happen, they first make a trench straight out from the burrow, where they carry the soil. It makes a trench from the end of the first one, branching off to the left. Then it makes another trench branching off to the right, so that the paths are shaped like a capital Y. These lead to large chambers where they all live together in separate villages. If any problem happens with one village, the other villages will rush up and dig out the other Prairie Dogs needing help. They lived in this way on the plains long before men had their farms there. It was the constant chopping of the grass by these little animals that made the herbage so rich and fine. Because of that, men were able to pasture their sheep upon the land. However, the poor Prairie Dog cannot remain near men's homes. They have made the grass fine and good, but they eat almost all of it. They tear up the ground so bad, that they have to be driven away or killed.

Another curiosity about the Prairie Dog is that they, like the Viscachas, decorate their homes by collecting everything they can find, such as pieces of bones, rocks and stones, plus many other miscellaneous items.

The mounds that the farmers are familiar with are not part of the inside Prairie Dog dwelling. If we could peek inside that, then the mystery of the dwellings would be made plain. The main hall of the dwellings are like a lofty apartment. Around the hall run two galleries, one level with the ceiling, the other higher still. The only way into the great hall is from the upper gallery, from which three passages lead thru the ceiling: but there are five short passages connecting the upper gallery with the lower. Tunnels run in all directions from the home, but each one comes out into the lower gallery surrounding the hall, so that the Prairie Dog, on arriving, must enter the lower gallery, then pop thru one of the passages that lead into the hall.

However, this is not the only part of the dwelling of the Prairie Dog. There is a little area for the younger Prairie Dogs. It is a rather large, well-lined area, where two

underground main roads or tunnels cross. One can see the reason for this. It affords the mother and her little ones ample chance of escape should danger threaten. The reason for the other passages near the central area is not clear. But we do understand that the height of the site is to give proper ventilation. For even in the ground, the Prairie Dog must have air.

The Prairie dog is a novelty to many people in other states and even other countries where they do not have any, and it will be even more so as they are getting less numerous here all of the time.

Additional information provided by Kirk Coats (2024)

Due to farming and other uses of the prairies from Montana to Texas, Prairie dogs were decimated from an original estimate of hundreds of millions, nearing a billion, to approximately 10 to 20 million today (in 2024). It is understandable that other parts of the United States and Europe had no idea of what was happening to the Prairie Dogs as European immigrants started farming the once natural prairies.

"There was a prairie dog town on 80 acres of buffalo grass pasture on the north side of the house where I was born northwest of Plains, Meade county, Kansas. My dad kept a milk cow on that pasture that I used to milk. There were also a couple of buffalo wallows in the pasture. That prairie dog town was one of two I was aware of growing up. Before immigrants settled in Southwest Kansas and plowed the land, the two Prairie Dog towns were probably connected."

"In the 1940s a friend taught my dad how to fly. Dad then bought a Luscomb tail dragger airplane. He wiped out the prairie dog town in our pasture so he could create safe landing strips for his plane."

"A farm a few miles away was abandoned in the 1950s. The second Prairie Dog town I was aware of was wiped out when the new owner wanted to add to the land he was already farming. That was the end of the Prairie Dog towns I knew about in Southwest Kansas."

There are still prairie dog towns scattered across the mid part of the country. There is a large one in Badlands National Park and another in Custer State Park, South Dakota.