

RABBIT DRIVES

Wichita County, Kansas

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The first thing that happened towards getting the rabbits drives together for the farmers was to let the community know about it. To help rid the farmland of the pests.

Wichita County with its large wheat fields had an immense number of rabbits. They were destroying the wheat and the cornfields. The damage was estimated to be a great loss to the farmers. Something had to be done, and so the drives were the only successful way to get rid of them. Each farmer would come to the rabbit drives and sometimes bring his wife to help. Each person who participated in the drive carried a club or some blunt instrument for slaying the rabbits. Some carried a hammer and others carried clubs three feet to six feet long.

Some leaders gave the instructions. All the farmers met at a certain spot, most generally a farmhouse. Here they were loaded into trucks and taken to area where the drive began. Sometimes the people were few, and they were covering such a scope of land that they were twenty to thirty feet apart. As high as twenty sections of land were surrounded. Then at the signal from the leader, who was sometimes on horseback, the people started pushing forward toward the small pen, built to corral the rabbits. The relief workers built this pen and it was made of either woven wire or lathe fencing. It was generally twenty-foot square with large wings projecting a quarter of a mile on each side of the entrance to the pen. This was to help hold the rabbits and keep them from turning back.

The people kept pushing forward yelling and shouting as they drove the pests ahead. Sometimes the rabbits darted through the line of men, women, and children. They were determined to get away to freedom, and then the excitement began. Clubs were flying through the air and it was dangerous to be there. Some of the people did not pay much attention to which way they were throwing their weapons, so there were several skinned shins and hands after each drive. In some instances, a few men with shotguns walked along behind the lines to shoot the pests that were lucky enough to get through.

The leaders had a heavy job trying to keep the lines straight, as some would get anxious to get to the goal and rush ahead of the rest. This would cause a break in the line and a chance for a rabbit to escape. Once, some men came to the drive intoxicated and the leader had quite a job keeping them in the line. They had some interesting remarks for the leader and it was impossible for him to get harsh with them as he could hardly keep from laughing.

The lines were to keep drawing in a little closer to the rabbits, which were milling around and trying to hide in holes and other low places. Three or four rabbits would bunch up together in a low spot of the ground. The ground would be covered with rabbits and most did not escape. On a still day, you could see a very large dust area that resembled a whirlwind. This was due to the rabbits running into the pen.

When they were all in the pen, the hunters surrounded it and started beating them to death with their clubs. A person could be covered with a mass of blood and flying hair. When the pests were all killed, they were gathered up and given to the farmers to feed their hogs. When the drives first began, the rabbits were sold to the farmers for a nickel apiece, and that money was used to buy shells for the ones who walked behind the line and shot the rabbits that got through the line.

There had been as high as two different rabbit drives on the same day. After the drive was over the men were all loaded into trucks again and taken back to the place they had started before. There, lunch was served by the lady's aid or some other organization. The man who owned the land on which the drive took place was supposed to furnish coffee to all, for the work they were doing.

It was a mournful sound around the rabbit pen, listening to the cries of the beaten rabbits. Some of the old-timers did not believe in the drives. They did not want the rabbits exterminated, as the buffalo were. The game commission sent a man out to investigate the loss of the animals. It was determined that it is not probable that the rabbits would vanish as quickly as the buffalo, as they increase much more often.

The following was from the *Leoti Weekly Newspaper* during the time of the rabbit drives...

"After drawing a net around twenty sections, the line of drivers converged upon a quarter section of sod with the rabbits in the closing ring. The entire quarter seemed to be a sea of grey, with waves rippling over the surface. The last stand of the surrounded rabbits showed leadership in their ranks. The sight of a flood of racing fur charging straight into the line of men on knees, with swinging clubs is something we shall remember. The charging rabbits sought to break through and several hundred won out to freedom. In the past few weeks, it is safe to say that Western Kansas Counties have rounded up and killed 200,000 of the pests.

Each drive would net a large number of slain rabbits, generally ranging from 2000 to 6000. People from other states hearing of the drive would come to participate in the sport. Cameramen took pictures of the rabbits in the pen and enlarged them to sell.

Some camera operators played a trick and exaggerated some of the pictures by showing the rabbits jumping over automobiles, or hanging in trees the size of a cow. Hopefully, these drives will not be needed again for many years. It is an experience that cannot be forgotten very soon."



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The drive did not exterminate all the rabbits and today (1936) they are still very thick. The farmers continue to feed the rabbits to their hogs.