

# The Grasshoppers

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By Howard Borchard

In 1873 there were two things that were foremost on the minds of the residents of O'Brien County – the county debt and the grasshoppers.

In Peck and Montzheimer's book, "Past and Present of O'Brien and Osceola Counties," published in 1914, they related the following: "The grasshoppers lasted seven years, or from five to seven years in the different localities. They were not merely the common, small tame grasshoppers seen each year along the edges of the pastures. They were known as, and called, the 'Rocky Mountain locust.' Their natural home and hatching ground was in the arid, dry sands and soil of the West. They were only visitors. In size they were often three inches in length. They were prolific, active and destructive, and no remedy for their practical destruction was found. They deposited their eggs in large numbers in the dry, mellow, soft dirt of recent plowing."

One of the writers said he could pick up from fifty to a hundred eggs and hold them in his hands in the sun, and within twenty minutes they would expand and hatch out and jump off his hands ready to land on a wheat or corn leaf. They preferred these plants over the tough prairie grass.

The authors further state, "When they arose in the millions in great clouds, they literally would dim and cloud the sun. When thus in the air they would usually fly with the wind and at a tremendous velocity." The writer further complained, "The impudent little cusses would work hard all day boring holes in cornstalks, eating and destroying his corn crop, and then in the evening they would line up on the fences and posts, and squirt corn juice in his face."

"Some farmers would dig a ditch along the field to stop their progress. Others tried a long trough filled with kerosene and pulled it along the fields with a horse. Imagine a penniless homesteader planting his crop with an oxen team and depending on that first crop to support his family." But the insects took it all and, as one man said, "My twenty-five acre crop didn't even last a day."

Also in their "Past and Present of O'Brien and Osceola Counties," Peck and Montzheimer relate what happened to the crops of Isaac Silverthorn. He retired from farming and later became Hartley's first Town Marshal. They wrote, "He had sixty acres of corn, ninety acres of wheat, and ten acres of oats, but in a short space of a few days during July, every vestige of his crops disappeared before the voracious appetites of the grasshoppers. By actual count he found that the insects ate two acres of potatoes in one hour."

The historians say the grasshoppers came in 1873, a very dry year. By 1879 they were mostly gone. Today they would have little chance of destroying a crop. With the modern insecticides, their lives would be very short.