

Gopher Tails

Electronic mail message from Mary Lynn Axtman, Fargo, ND, native of Rugby, ND

This is a true tale among our family from the Flickertail State of North Dakota about gopher tails.

In 1954, our Bickler, Buechler family was having a family reunion near the village of Orrin, ND. Almost all of my cousins had grown up in the North Dakota area and were more than familiar with gophers and what a nuisance they could be. However, one great-uncle had moved to New York City where he and his wife were raising four sons. This would be the first visit "out west" for the boys and they were primed with many cowboy and Indian type stories along with other sights and experiences they might encounter away from the big city.

Upon their arrival in North Dakota, the first thing the sons wanted to do was catch a gopher and collect a tail. No problem, there are millions in the state. With a trap in hand, we helped them find the nearest gopher hole and set the trap. Within minutes, a gopher was caught. Excitedly, the New York boys ran to the trap, proceeded to cut the tail off of the gopher with their new pocketknives and released the gopher from the trap! "Why did you let the gopher go?" we asked in astonishment. To us, the only good gopher was a dead one. They had thought that gophers were such a rare animal [rodent] that they should let it go without doing further harm!

So, the joke in the family after that was to look for any "tailless" gophers who might be descendants. At our 1999 family reunion, one NY son still has among his possessions that same "North Dakota gopher tail."