

Pied Piper of Leola

Electronic mail message from Jake Bergmann

"These are great stories - thanks - brings back a few memories of summer months when gophers were a big part of a kid's life out in the country! In the 1970's Saskatchewan farm kids were apparently exporting gophers to Japan where they were sold as exotic pets for \$200 - \$300 each! Upon hearing this we chuckled as this was described by some as our revenge for the arrival of the Datsun on the prairies! I wonder if any managed to escape and started up their characteristic colonies with which we were all very familiar?

This leads to a rather amusing story which supposedly happened around the turn of the last century in Grand Forks, ND:

"The story of "The Pied Piper of Leola" begins in 1903. A man named C.W. Hawes ran a livery stable in Leola and was a born promoter, so he was elated when he received a communication from G.A. Tolbett of Chicago appointing him the local representative of the Australian Rabbit Extermination Company. Hawes received a letter outlining the company's plan to exterminate the rabbits in Australia by shipping in live gophers from America. The plan included the inoculation of gophers with a disease fatal to rabbits but harmless to the gophers.

Hawes part in the plan was to buy live gophers and hold them until Tolbett came to Leola to claim them and ship them to Australia. So on April 23, 1903, Hawes placed this advertisement in the McPherson County Herald: "10,000--LIVE GOPHERS WANTED--10,000. We will pay 25c apiece for female and 15c for male gophers delivered at Leola House on May 2, 1903."

Soon Hawes had gophers by the hundreds in all kinds of containers including buckets, wooden boxes and crates covered with screen wire, lath or wooden slats. Soon the livery was so full of gophers there was no room left for extra horses or anything else. On May 2, the date appointed for the gopher pickup, Dawes began allowing people to stack crates of gophers on the front porch of his hotel, the Leola House, much to the consternation of his guests. A crowd of people gathered and waited for the representative of the Australian Rabbit Extermination Company. At the end of the day they were still waiting.

As time passes the difficulties of storing thousands of gophers in close quarters became apparent. Some gave birth to more gophers. Then the captive and poorly fed rodents started to attack and eat each other. The stench became unbearable.

What to do! There was still no word from the Australian Rabbit Extermination Company. Finally Hawes couldn't take it anymore. He hacked off lath, ripped off screen wire and turned the gophers loose on Leola. They swarmed under and over boardwalks until people could hardly pass without stepping on gophers. As the animals spread over town they decimated the early gardens. Hawes lost his investment and whatever popularity he may have had. It was not until long afterward that Leola folk learned that the whole affair was a practical joke played on Hawes by William Cochrane, a young man who had come West for his health and was employed as principal of the Leola schools. Cochrane was suffering from tuberculosis and before he died a few years later confessed

the whole thing to his brother. Cochrane had called on a friend in Chicago who helped him set the whole thing up....."