Tall Tales in Kansas Newspapers

by

Mary Francis White

. . . The early day editors who came to Kansas were for the most part very interesting people, as many of you know. Many of them came from the East, they were well educated, and they played an important part in the development of Kansas as a state. There were two who were particularly good at the kind of thing that I'm interested in. The first is Tom McNeal, who was down at Medicine Lodge for a while and then in Topeka. He wrote a series of stories about Truthful James. Later, I'd like to give you an idea of what he said. And the other is Dave Leahy, who is the father of the present Dave Leahy, Director of State Forestry, Fish and Game Commission. I think Dave Leahy must have been a very interesting person to know. I wrote to both the Wichita *Eagle* and the Wichita *Beacon* to find out just what times he had served down there as a reporter, and they wrote back "intermittently for twenty-five years." The thing was, you see, he would start out on one newspaper, and he would do something to make the editor angry. Then he'd get fired, so he'd begin working on the other newspaper and do the same thing and get fired, and so he'd go back to the first one; he just wavered back and forth between the two. But he did some very wonderful stories.

Now newspapers were very influential in the life of the community, and if you are interested in history at all or in the historical aspect of the development of our state, I think you should work with the newspapers . . . . For these early newspapermen were interested in all kinds of things about Kansas, and the papers reflected those interests. I finally isolated, as an area of study, "Tall Tales in Kansas Newspapers." The caption itself covers, as far as I'm concerned, a number of types. I hope here simply to sample certain of these types, for the field is obviously broad and generally ill-defined.

One type of story that I have been interested in was the "hoax," or the type of story that was sent to Eastern newspapers by the reporters. They were paid by the inch, or perhaps by the word. Oftentimes they didn't have stories to send in from Kansas, so at night they would whip up a story. They would start a story that would keep up for several days. One of the favorites was about the child that had fallen into a bored well, and they would tell about the sadness of the mother, and the great anxiety of the

people of the community, and carry this on for days, and then finally have the child rescued. Of course, you knew that the child couldn't have fallen into the well in the first place because the pipe was three inches in diameter or something of that sort. These early reporters made a good story out of it and got paid lots of money, and this made lots of publicity for Kansas.

I mentioned Dave Leahy just a minute ago, and I'll tell you of one of the hoaxes that he pulled. He often came up with a story on April Fool's Day, printed on the front page, perfectly naturally. Then he would go around to see just how many of the people were taken in by the story. My favorite of his stories concerns the dry season in Kansas, the first of April. There were some frogs in the bed of the Arkansas River up above Wichita, and they were just about to die because they had had no water at all, and the dust was just choking them to death. A freshet was coming downstream, and by some means of science unknown to man, the frogs figured out just exactly how far they would have to hop to reach that freshet. According to the newspaper story, it had been figured very accurately, and they would meet at 10:15 on the morning of April 1st, right where the Douglas Avenue Bridge crosses over the Arkansas River. Well, on April 1st, Dave Leahy went down to the river to see how many people had been taken in by the story, and there were hordes of people; you just couldn't even get to the bridge. So he sort of "snuck around" behind to see what was going on. Then he noticed that in the crowd was Colonel Murdock, who happened to be the owner of the newspaper. Leahy very quickly vanished from the crowd, went back to his office, and began packing his things. Pretty soon Murdock came into his office, and said, "Dave, that's to be the last of your April Fool stories." But he did stay on in the newspaper that particular time.

Other stories you find in the newspapers had to do with experiences of the settlers: there are anecdotes, jokes of all kinds, and lots of tall tales. Early in the history of the state, there were stories to persuade people to come to Kansas. Now at the time Kansas was opened up as a territory, it had acquired quite a bad name, quite a bad reputation; and people going to the West did just as some people do today—they tried to by-pass Kansas. Today we try to by-pass it by flying over it at great height; in the early days they would go around. And so the people who were trying to make a living here, trying to develop the territory, began publicizing the wonders of Kansas. One story I found in practically every county newspaper was a story entitled, "This is Eden." It goes on to tell about what a wonderful paradise a given county was. If you want to know where to live in Paradise, any county in Kansas will be just fine—just move in. The glib-tongued promoters of new towns in Kansas territory resorted to all the tricks in ad-

vertising to lure people to the state. Towns were said to be spread over the surface of the state as thickly as flees on a dog's back. Townsites by the hundreds were laid out by the land speculators, who hoped to fleece the newcomers. These ads appeared in railroad stations, post offices, public buildings—all over the eastern part of the United States, and even in Europe.

One traveler came to Kansas, crossing the prairie one day, and he came upon a man with a plow who seemed to be preparing the land for agricultural purposes. The traveler said, "My friend, ain't you laying off those corn rows quite a distance apart?" And this old, long-whiskered man in his high boots and his shirtsleeves and his broad-rimmed hat said, "Corn rows, how come?" "Why, yes, those corn rows over there on the prairie." "Gosh all hemlock, stranger!" exclaimed the Kansas man, as he spat at the prairie-dog hole a couple of yards away and scored a bull's-eye, "It it possible that you ain't heard of it yet?" "Heard what?" asked the traveler. "Why, this here boom; man alive, where you been? Them ain't corn rows over there, they's streets and alleys, and this here's a city. You are right now standing on the corner of Commercial Street and Emporium Avenue, where we aim to build the hotel with forty rooms. No, sir, this ain't no corn patch, not by a durnsight."

Of course, Kansas has always been an agricultural state, and there are many, many, many stories about the great fertility of the soil, of the crops we can raise here, and I have just story after story after story after story. I've tried to select some of the best ones. A man from Ohio, Mr. McVey, questioned some of the reports that he had heard about the crops in Kansas, specifically those about the sweet alfalfa and the shortage of pumpkins —the shortage occurring because the vines grew so fast they wore the pumpkins out dragging them over the ground. This Tom McNeal that I mentioned before, from down at Medicine Lodge, the veteran story teller, soon set him straight about these reports with this account: "The stories about the pumpkins are chestnuts; they did not originate in Kansas, and we repudiate them. To begin with, no vine is strong enough to drag a Kansas pumpkin. The great difficulty in raising pumpkins in Kansas is to keep the pumpkin from pulling the vine out of the ground. It is true that Kansas alfalfa probably beats any in the world, both for yield and sweetness. A Kansas bee keeper says, 'One trouble about raising bees near alfalfa is that they gather too much honey.' He had a large swarm of bees located a mile from an alfalfa field. One day he watched the workers go out to gather honey, but he didn't see any coming back. He didn't understand it and went over toward the alfalfa field to see what was the trouble. About half way over he met the bees walking back to their hives. They had loaded up with honey until they couldn't fly and had to walk and carry their load. He said

that he had to use over two quarts of glycerin on the blistered feet of those bees. 'The intelligent insects soon became accustomed to the treatment, and they would lie down on their backs while he rubbed glycerin on their sore feet. This took so much time that it ruined the profits of the business,' he said. There's no doubt that Missouri is a great country, but it will not compare for a moment with Kansas. Think of the Kansas pumpkins. Gentlemen, when I was on a farm in that glorious country, I once lost three valuable cows. For three weeks I searched for them in vain, and was returning home in disgust, when I suddenly heard the tinkle of a cow bell. Investigation showed that the cows were inside of a pumpkin, eating calmly and enjoying their commodious quarters. How did they get in, you say? Well, the pumpkin vines grew rapidly there and dragged the pumpkin over the rough ground until a hole was worn into the side, through which the cows entered. I afterwards had it cured and used it for a wagon shed.' "

Well, you get the same story in paper after paper.

"Is it a good country for corn, you ask? Stranger, you'll never know what a corn country is until you go to Kansas. When the husking is done in the fall, the men go out with mallets and wedges and split up the corn stocks for shipment to the East for use as telegraph poles. Or they saw them off in length to be used as cart-wheels. When the men are husking, they carry along step-ladders, which they place along the cornstalks. Two men then climb up, and they cut off the ears with a crosscut saw, letting them fall to the ground. Four horses are then hitched to each ear, and it is dragged to the crib. Big farms there? I should say so. Why, when I started one year to plow a furrow the entire length of the farm, I had a boy follow me to plant the corn. And when I got to the end of the furrow and started for home, I found that the corn the boy planted was ripe. So I just husked my way home and got there just in time to spend New Year's." One of the other stories was about the young boy who climbed up the cornstalk, and then couldn't get down because the corn was growing so fast; that appeared in many of the books that I read, but I didn't find it in any of the newspapers.

Kansans became indignant at slighting remarks made about Kansas by strangers, particularly about the wheat. One farmer soon set a stranger straight about the kind of wheat raised in the state. This stranger came up to a Kansas man and said, "Let's see, they raise wheat in Kansas, don't they?"

"Raise wheat! Who raises wheat? No, sir, decidedly no, sir, it raises itself. Why, if we undertook to cultivate wheat in this state, it would run us out; there wouldn't be any place to put our houses."

"But I've been told the grasshoppers take a good deal of it."

"Why, of course, they do; if they didn't I don't know what we would

do. The cussed stuff would run all over the state and drive us out, choke us up. Those grasshoppers are a Godsend; only there ain't half enough of them."

"Is the wheat nice and plump?"

"Plump? I don't know what you call plump wheat, but there are seventeen in our family including ten servants, and when we want bread, we just go out and fetch a kernel of what and bake it."

"Well, do you ever soak it in water first?"

"Oh, no, that wouldn't do, it would swell a little, and then we couldn't get it into our range oven."

Whenever Kansas has a good growing summer, tales about the plant life flourish. Naturally some of these stories are about the state flower, the sunflower. This story is typical of the stories told about the flower: "About the year that the Kansas Pacific started building to the west, the sunflowers grew so high and thick that they were cut up and used as firewood. One farmer, whose entire corn crop was shaded out by them, made a small fortune sawing up sunflower stalks for railroad ties. This farmer also built a long barn out of the sunflower stalks and kept his cow in it. The cow would wander away, so one night he tied her to a sunflower stalk. Next morning she was gone. He looked for her quite a while, until he heard her bawl from up in the sky. Then he perceived that the sunflower stalk had grown up in the night, so that the cow hung by her halter forty feet in the air, and he had to chop the stalk down before he could milk that morning."

Then there are many stories about animals in Kansas. Naturally, when the settlers came to this region, they found animals that were strange to them, and they had many experiences with them, such as the buffalo. And then farther west—you will remember that Kansas at one time extended as far west as the Rocky Mountains—some of the settlers had shocking experiences with grizzly bears. And in addition to the natural animals that the settlers found there, they had to make up animals . . . . but more of this later.

Down in Barber County, a group of men tried to outdo each other in lying about the crops. The first told the old story about the pumpkin vine that grew so fast they wore out the pumpkins, the second told of the man who took off his shoes, waded around in the Kansas mud, and then lay down to sleep. When he awoke in the morning, he found that both legs had sprouted and his feet had grown so that he couldn't wear anything less than a number eighteen shoe in place of the number seven that had fit him the night before. The third told of the boy who climbed the Kansas cornstalk in sport and then couldn't get down because the corn grew faster than he could slide down. But it was the fourth man, Deacon Lester, who taught them all the story about the blackbirds. And the reason I mentioned

this is that this story led me into some other stories about the natural life that earlier settlers found here.

"Blackbirds are bad down in Barber County; they are worrying the farmers up and down the beautiful Medicine Valley. One day a farmer boy rushed into the house and told his father that the dratted blackbirds were eating up all of the wheat. The old man grabbed his shotgun, but when he went to look for the shot, he found that there was none in the house. He was a resourceful man, and in place of shot, he loaded his gun with a handful of carpet tacks in each barrel. Then he rushed out to the field of grain. The birds saw him coming wih blood in his eye, and they flew away, only to light up in the great cottonwood tree where they set up a tremendous chatter at the farmer. The farmer was hot; he saw the birds congregated in the top of the huge cottonwood tree, and he let loose at them with both barrels. When the smoke cleared away, he heard the most infernel chatter from the birds that he had ever listened to, but they had not left the tree. Then he discovered that he had nailed them all fast to the limbs with tacks from his gun. For a little while there was a wild fluttering of wings, and then the farmer saw the cottonwood start from the ground. The blackbirds, by one united effort, pulled it up by the roots and flew away with it. The farmer watched the tree slowly vanishing into the upper air, until it became a mere speck in the sky, and then disappear from sight. Then with the expression, 'Well, I'll be doggone,' he turned toward his humble home."

I mentioned that the settlers had experiences with grizzly bears. In the very early days before the settlement of the western part of the Kansas territory, which at one time extended to the foot of the Rocky Mountains, some of the trappers and explorers were attacked by grizzly bears that had wandered down through the mountains to the open prairie. The following story of one such incident was told to a group of hunters gathered around a campfire at the close of the day.

"Grizzly bears grow as large as the law allows. Some of them will weigh 1,800 pounds, and if a man should see one of these critters walking up to him on his hind feet and swinging his forepaws, he would be apt to think that he was going to the Legislator mighty quick. Even an Indian is often terribly scared by one of these bears. We camped one evening just at sunset by the side of a small creek in the prairie, and a little beyond was tall prairie grass and some small bushes. One of the younger Indians strayed over among them, looking for game. In a few moments we heard first his gun, then the warhoop, and then a yell, which was prolonged to a continuous scream. Then the scared Indian broke cover on a clean run, loping for life. and close at his heels a grizzly bear that shuffled and shook as he ran as if he hadn't a bone in his body. A Frenchman seized his gun and ran

to meet them and fired at the bear without stopping him, and then he too turned, and the two came on in double-quick time, the bear striking and snapping at their rear. In a moment more, he was within the reach of all our guns, and we brought him to a dead halt, but not the poor Indian. He ran through the camp, giving a warhoop with every leap, and far beyond into the prairie, before he could be brought up and made to know where he was. An old hunter is never anxious to scrape acquaintance with a grizzly bear. One who knows them will not shoot at one from choice, except with at least an ounce ball, and when he feels entirely certain of a dead shot. The hunters are willing to give them a wide berth unless they have greatly the advantage. I saw in the mountains a man whose arms and chest were stripped nearly bare of flesh and who was covered with scars elsewhere from a battle with one of these bears. He was a Frenchman, and he and a companion were hunting and traveling alone and were, of course, strongly bound to each other. They met one day unexpectedly with a grizzly bear, who at once attacked them. They both fired, and having only wounded the animal, they both turned and ran. After having gained some distance ahead, one looked back and saw that the bear had caught his companion and that he was making desperate efforts to defend himself with his hunter's knife, while the bear was tearing his flesh in the most horrid manner. His regard for his companion overcame his love of life, and he resolved to aid him or die with him. He ran back. As he could not wait to load his gun, he attacked the bear with his knife and hatchet. After a desperate conflict in which both were dreadfully mangled, the bear fell partly upon one and died. For a long time neither was able to rise. The flesh upon the arms and chest and face of the one first overtaken by the bear was torn into strings or stripped entirely off, so that the bones lay bare, yet no artery was cut. The other was at length able to crawl on his belly to a spring at some distance and obtain some water for himself and his friend. For days he crawled thus back and forth for water, unable to rise upon his feet. When their little stock of food was gone, they cut pieces from the bear and ate them raw, drinking water from the spring. Often he told me the wolves would come and eat on one side of the bear, while he lay on the other. The one least hurt recovered so as to nurse his companion, whose frightful wounds began to heal. And in the end, they were relieved by a party of trappers. The one I saw had very little meat left on him. Better let a grizzly alone, if you can't put an ounce ball through the vitals."

Following is a story which exemplifies another type. That is, anyone who acquired property by trading on the prairie needed to be pretty alert during the transaction, to be sure that the trader did not get the better of him. Often, as in the case of his story, the victim of the trading was entirely too unsuspecting.

A man came riding up the street on a tough-looking, but apparently, sound and serviceable mule. A big German settler accosted him with, "How you trade with me for horse?" The other looked about for the horse and said, "What kind of horse? Where it is?" "Oh, he good horse. He no look so good, but he good horse." The German brought around his horse, leading him again, and saying, "He no look good, but you can ride 'im. How you trade?" The man sized up the animal, which was a fair-sized horse, apparently not old, and said as a venture, "Well, give you $5.00 to boot." "All right, I trade," the German said; "he no look so good, but he fine horse." The man forked over the five, skinned the saddle off the mule and put it on the horse, mounted, and started off. After a few steps, the horse stumbled over a bump in the ground and fell. The rider got up, jerked the horse to his feet, and again looked him over. This time he got square in front of the animal and immediately discovered the trouble. "Why, you blamed Dutchman, this horse is blind!" he exclaimed. "Well, dat's all right, I did tell you two or three times, 'he no look good.' What you think, he no look good?" "Ain't it the truth?" said the man, and he led his blind horse away, knowing he had been bested by the other man.

To return to animal life and such things. One of the most unpleasant features of life on the prairie was the abundance of snakes. They would crawl through the openings in the floor, crawl up the walls of the sod houses, and hide under shocks of wheat. Along the trails could be found dens with hundreds of snakes, crawling in all directions. Both bull snakes and rattlesnakes were numerous. Other snakes recorded to be found were the "blow snakes," which caused stupification and death by blowing their venom upon the air; the blue racer, which traveled like lightning; and the glass snake, which was so brittle that the slightest of blows would break it in two. But the most interesting snake of all was the hoop snake, though not many people have actually seen one. Here's a first hand account of J. L. Harrison's experiences of a Chunganunga hoopsnake:

"Last week I wanted a mess of bullheads, and as the racing Chunganunga is the place for this beautiful game fish, I went thither. When fishing in this limpid stream, I always carry, in addition to my tackle, a baseball bat to guard against the ferocious snakes that infest the banks. It was a good day for fishing, for at the end of two hours, I had a string of sixty-eight bullheads. Abhoring the name of gamehog, I was satisfied then to quit. As I was rolling up my lines, a slight rustling in the weeds back of me attracted my attention. Presently there appeared a most strange object. In appearance, it resembled a Ford automobile tire. It rolled gently down to the water's edge and assumed a horizontal position with a flop. I realized instantly I stood in the presence of the far-famed hoopsnake. The monster's head was the size of your fist. His eyes were beady and glittering and

just back of his nose, tufts of whiskers projected, similar to those of a rat. I took in these details in a second, but having no love for any kind of snake, I seized my trusty bat and struck him a terrific blow. A most astonishing phenomenon resulted. Instantly the snake broke into seven distinct pieces, which lay quiescent for a moment and then upended themselves and walked off in the bushes and disappeared. Overcome with astonishment and awe, I made a fatal mistake, which I will regret as long as I live. I failed to follow to see whether, as according to tradition, the pieces eventually reunited."

Another interesting kind of snake is the ticking snake. In August of 1886, a snake on J. H. Segart's farm swallowed an eight-day clock. Until the clock ran down, its ticking could be heard distinctly. Some time later Mr. Segart found some eggs that the reptile had deposited in the sandbank. When he broke the eggs open, he found that each one contained an open-faced watch in first-class running order. And Mr. Segart sold the watches at a huge profit. Later on he gave the snake a post-auger, hoping the snake would produce sufficient corkscrews to enable him to open a novelty store in Kansas.

The grasshoppers, of course, were very hearty specimens, and some settlers believed that they returned periodically to the same localities. The La Crosse *Republican*, for example, said that some of the old settlers in that vicinity had been able to recognize some of the grasshoppers which had recently invaded the community as the original ones that swept over the state in 1874. Now these grasshoppers are presumably not less than thirty-nine years old, and they are growing grey and bald, and they wear long, grizzled whiskers. But they are still rugged and are able to eat and spit with as much vigor as they did in 1874.

One of the most noticeable characteristics of the grasshoppers was their ferocious appetite. One man reports that he had to hitch his team to a wagon and run it all day to keep the grasshoppers from eating the wagon tires. Another says that he saw fifteen or twenty of them pull up a corn-stock and fly off with it, eating as they went along. Another said that after they had stripped off all the leaves, they would pull up the stocks, sit back on their hindermost, and swallow them whole. Another said that they were so thick in his field that there was not room for one half of them on the stocks; consequently a general row arose and they pulled up the corn stalks and began beating each other to death, by which means he saved some of his corn. And still another man said that they ate the handle and commenced to eat the tines of his pitch-fork. And lastly, after devouring every green thing on the place, they formed in a line on the ridge-board of his house and very complacently began to pick their teeth with the shingle nails that they had drawn from the roof.

One year the grasshoppers were so numerous that they chased the turkeys, eating their feathers if they did not keep moving. And a good story with which to conclude the discussion of grasshoppers is a classic of the grasshoppers which descended upon a field of corn and found there a plow and a team of horses, left by the farmer who had gone home for lunch. After eating all the corn, the grasshoppers ate the horses and tossed the horseshoes to see which one could have the harness and the plow.

Another pest which the citizens of Kansas have had to contend with is the jackrabbit. Jackrabbits have always been a problem for Kansas, and there have always been a good many stories about them. I mentioned a while ago Tom McNeil's character, Truthful James. This is what Truthful James tells about the Anti-rabbit Association, which was formed in McPherson County: " 'The question for discussion this evening,' said President Sed Wilkinson, as he rapped for order, 'is whether the cottontail rabbit is a harmless critter or a dangerous animal. I understand that our original charter member, Truthful James, sets up the claim that under some circumstances the cottontail becomes a menace to the peace and safety of the community. We would like to hear what he has to say on that subject.'

'Well, there are them that claim,' said Truthful, as he rose to his feet, 'that the cottontail rabbit is the most timid of all animals. And as a general proposition, that opinion is safe to gamble on, but there are always circumstances that may change a general rule. When I was living out in McPherson County in the early days, there was a power of rabbits, some jacks and more cottontails. They was a regular nuisance. You couldn't put out a tree and save it without sittin' up nights with it to keep off the rabbits. We organized an anti-rabbit association, and we had regular meetings, with a literary program and debates on such subjects as: immersion, capitol punishment, and female sufferance. Mighty nigh every settler of the county joined the association, and it got so that a man couldn't be elected for a county office until he would declare himself on the rabbit question. We imported a lot of greyhounds and decided that on a certain day we would organize a county-wide rabbit hunt and exterminate every rabbit. The plan might have worked all right, if we had gone at it while the ground was froze up. But we waited until spring, and things had commenced to grow. There was a power of loco in the country at that time, and it was just about the first thing in the spring to start. The rabbits that season seemed to be stuck on the weed and ate the loco as fast as it grew, and pretty soon they was all crazy. They got so that it seemed they didn't care for nothing. Well, we organized the hunt and rounded up a big bunch of cottontail rabbits. The dogs made a dash for them, thinking they had a soft snap. But there was the biggest surprise party for them that you ever saw. Instead of running away, them crazy rabbits turned on the dogs and jumped right into

their faces. There was ten dogs and something over a 1,000 rabbits. Well, sir, the first thing we knew here come them ten dogs running and howling, like they were scared to death. After them on the keen jump came a 1,000 cottontail rabbits, nipping at their heels. We saw how it was and climbed trees. Yes, there was a good many trees along the creeks even then. We saved ourselves, but the rabbits chased the dogs two miles further and ran them into the river. I want to say to you that a loco rabbit is one of the most dangerous of wild beasts.' "

And, of course, there is the story about the jackrabbit that carried mail. This is another one of Truthful James' stories. He told about people who trained their rabbits to go to the county seat—oh, something like twenty-five miles away—and get the mail and bring it back. Finally, they killed their rabbits off; they just got worn out because they were making four round-trips a day and that was just too much for the poor rabbits.

Some mention must be made of the cinder beetle, also. The cinder-beetle is an insect which ruined the railroad tracks by eating the cinder ballast and damaging the rails and the ties. Dave Leahy, in one of his inimitable stories in the newspaper, described an incursion of cinder beetles which was working east from Colorado, eating the ballast from under the rails on the Santa Fe right-of-way. And he added that Kansas was looking for cinder beetle inspectors. Well, now, you know what happened as soon as that story went out. The next day his office was flooded with deserving, but thick-headed, Republicans, desiring to inquire about where these deputy inspectorships for cinder beetles might be obtained by loyal members of the Grand Old Party.

There are a good many stories about the cinder beetle. Two newspaper editors carried on quite a feud about which was better, the cinder beetle or the doodle bug. They wrote back and forth to each other in their weekly columns.

One of the best of the animals in Kansas was the sandhill dodger. Now, I am sure that you have heard this story before, because this is a standard folk story, and yet we find it here applied to Kansas. This animal, which is the most wonderful example of the theory of adaptation to the environment, is the sandhill dodger, known only to the inhabitants of the sand hill districts of Nebraska and Kansas. However, he has many close relatives in other regions, and his exploits are the basis of many good stories.

B. Larabee of Liberal gave this explanation of the peculiar animal to the other members of the State Forestry, Fish, and Game Commission a number of years ago: "They're getting rather uncommon now; I always have regretted that I didn't capture one of them for the museum. The animal, a four-legged one, has run around those sandhills so much that it has developed legs longer on one side than the other. It runs with two short

legs next to the hill and makes wonderful speed. They're exceptionally intelligent, too. I remember once one of our hands—his name was Shorty—bet that he could catch one with his rope. There were a lot of bets placed on the event. You know, the old cowboys *would* bet—them days are gone forever, of course. Well, we all went out to where one had been reported, and sure enough we located it. Shorty went after it whooping and hollering and swinging his rope. The dodger started around the hill, and Shorty doubled his cries. Then we saw what an intelligent animal the dodger was. Shorty met the animal at full speed, and you'd never guess what it did. Well, sir, when it saw Shorty coming toward it, the little animal turned its nose right down its mouth, went right on through its entire body, and headed the other way with its short legs still next to the hill. Shorty never did catch it."

A young woman who did her master's thesis at the University of Indiana came out and collected stories around Paxico, McFarland, and so on, and this is one of the stories that she picked up in June, 1956, which reminded me about the sandhill dodger.

"Yeah, I had a dog there, and he was running rabbits and wouldn't catch them, so I got a buggy whip, and I took right along the side of that rabbit and that dog and made him catch the rabbit. Well, somebody left a sycamore fence up there, and the next day he was running the rabbit, and he was really running that rabbit. He run into that sycamore, and it split him right in two, and, you know, if you grab them and slap them together they'll grow together, and I got 'im wrong end to end he was was barkin' out of both ends then. He sure fooled them rabbits then; they couldn't tell whether he was a-coming or going."

Well, let's turn to another area, weather. Kansas weather has always been a subject for speculation and sport. No one speaks the praises of the beautiful springtime, of the glorious days of Indian summer, of the mild winters, of the many days of bright sunshine. Instead, publicity is given to the periods of extreme heat, the severe drouths, successive rainfall, strong winds, destructive cyclones, and intense cold and deep snow. Naturally, since they came from Kansas, the stories have been exaggerated and have exaggerated the conditions of the weather. But the stories themselves do form a part of the tradition of the state. Furthermore, an element of humor has crept into most of the stories. (I might say here, incidently, while I was collecting the stories, I found many stories about cyclones, I found them about the drouth, about the blizzard, and everything else, except one phenomenon, and that is the flood. I really made a search for these. Now I could have missed such stories. But often after a disaster has happened and people are back at work again, the Kansan makes his usual adjustment to disaster by coming up with an exaggerated story about what has happened,

and as I said, I found them about the other disastrous aspects of Kansas weather, but I didn't find any tall tales about floods at all. I read newspapers for the cities and counties along the regions that flood, but I didn't find a one. I don't say there aren't any, but at least they didn't get into the newspapers as the ones about cyclones do.)

But to continue. An interesting report of the hot weather in July appeared in Kansas *News*, published in Emporia in July 24, 1858, just about a 100 years ago. This was the weather report for July:

Journal of the Weather
Thursday the 15th—hot
Friday—hotter
Saturday—hottest
Sunday—hot-ten-tot
Monday—hot-ten-tot-an-tisamo
Tuesday—hot as hell

Frequently the periods of intense heat were accompanied by drouth. These times of drouth gave rise to many tall tales, some of which are given here. One man said that it had been so dry for so long that he thought he'd better send a sample of his drinking water off for testing. It came back, showing only 30% moisture. When a person spoke of a three-inch rain, he meant that the drops fell that far apart. In one place stamps had to be pinned on the envelopes, because the moisture was so scarce. One man caught bass that had never learned to swim. The creek on one farm had only enough water to run three days a week. In Kansas it is so dry that a well has to be rung through a wringer in order to get any water. (And this comment I'm sure was made, originally, in Kansas, but the other evening I was watching TV, and I heard it told in Arkansas. I don't know whether you saw that program the other night or not about tracing down the song about two sisters. When the reporter got to the story, you remember they were talking about how hot it was, and one of them said, "A hog has to be soaked over night so that he will hold swill.")

This next is an actual experience, presumably, of some people who were driving along through Western Kansas during a dust storm. "We were returning home from visiting relatives at Hutchinson and Pratt, and we were detoured by high water at Garden City. Just east of Lincoln we ran into a dust storm that was as dark as the inside of a vinegar jug. Well, it just happened to be raining at the same time. It seemed that that dust had been wet up so often that it just got stubborn and refused to let the rain through. We drove along for a couple of miles under a solid ceiling, like a fly hunting an escape. And as we drove, the ceiling seemed to be settling, and we wondered why that layer of dust was solid dirt for a depth of about

twenty-five feet, floating on that eight-foot layer of compressed air, dust underneath and water running along the top. Why, it had settled down over a windmill, until only the wheel was sticking out at the top, and the flowing water was turning the wheel. Well, then we could see why that much was slowly sinking, because a few feet away at regular intervals a big bubble rose on the surface and a big puff of dust would rise. That windmill was pumping the dust out from underneath. It looked like a steam locomotive starting up a hill with a long freight. As I say, it's hard to believe."

The cyclone tall tales swapped in the office of W. G. Tanby, who once was the city commissioner of streets in Topeka, include many of the traditional ones about cyclones. I am going to give this account to give you a sampling of those stories. You will notice, as they start out, the first person who tells a story tells just a very ordinary one. He tells of things that all of us have actually seen if we have visited a territory that has been devastated by a cyclone. And then, as each one adds his story, they get a little bit better as they go along. We all know the technique.

" 'I saw a cottonwood tree that had stood in the way of a cyclone,' said Mr. Porter, the assistant city engineer. 'The big wind had just gathered up a stack of wheat straw; the straws were blown right into the wood of that tree, just like each straw had been a nail and had been driven in. Straws were sticking with one end embedded into the wood, so that tree looked like a huge mule tail, sticking out of the ground.'

'Why, I believe that all right,' replied Mr. Allen, the inspector.

'Oh, that's nothing,' said Mr. Young; 'I saw a plow once which had been struck by a cyclone. It was an ordinary walking plow with a steel beam. When the farmer who was using it saw a storm coming, he unhitched and left the plow setting in the field. The cyclone hit that steel beam and whipped it right back between the handle, just bent it double and never moved the plow an inch from where it had been left.'

'Well, I'll believe anything I'm told about a cyclone,' declared Allen. 'And speaking of that plow, reminds me of what I saw up in Nebraska once. A farmer I know very well, in fact he lived on a farm adjoining mine, was struck by lightning while he was plowing. Both he and his team were killed. He left a widow and a large family of children. None of the children was large enough to put in the crops, and the poor woman had no money for a hired man or to buy a team. As we were coming home from the cemetery after burying her husband, a number of us talked over her situation and decided that we neighbors would get together and plow the land and put in the crop for her. We noticed a big funnel-shaped cloud, but we didn't think much about it, until we got near the field where the man had been killed. Well, sir, you can believe this or not, just as you please, but it

is a fact. A whirlwind hit that plow, which was still standing in the furrow. The wind took that plow right straight down the furrow, just as straight as if a man was driving a team hitched to it. When the end of the furrow was reached, the wind changed and turned that plow at right angles and plowed another furrow, and when the next corner was reached, the same thing happened. And that whirlwind just kept doing that way, and right before the eyes of all the people coming from the funeral; that whole field was plowed. Yes, sir, all in about a minute. Yes, and after that quarter section was plowed, the wind hit the granary where the seed wheat was stored, turned the building over, and scattered that wheat all over the field and covered it up. Yes, sir, I'll believe anything anyone tells me about a cyclone, for I actually saw that.'

'Well, didn't another cyclone come along about harvest-time and harvest that wheat, thrash it and take it to the market and blow the exact amount of money back out of the bank to pay for it?' queried one of the men.

'Ah, you're joking now, but what I've been telling you, I saw with my own eyes.'

Mr. Tanby spoke up and said, 'Well, it was the cyclone that gave me my start in business. I was in the moving business. Two men in different parts of the town decided to trade houses. Each wanted to keep the lot he had, but each wanted the other fellow's house, and I took a contract to move them. The men went on vacation, decided to leave town and so to avoid the inconvenience which would result while the houses were being moved. While they were away, just before I started work, a cyclone came along one night and moved those houses for me, didn't disturb another thing in the town, and each house was set up just as nice and plumb as if I had done the work myself. I just sat down and wrote a telegram to the two men and told them that the job was completed, and I wanted the money. I never told them how the work had been done for me, and they never figured out how I moved the wells and cellars along with the houses.'

'Well, cyclones certainly do strange things,' declared one man. 'Tanby's experience reminds me of what happened to a contractor I know up in Marysville, Kansas. He had a contract to build a fine residence there. I drew the plans and specifications, and the materials were all assembled. The stone for the foundation, the cement for the cellar, brick for the chimneys, lumber, shingles, window sashes, nails, and hardware were all on hand. Along came a cyclone and dug the cellar, laid the foundations, built the chimneys, sawed all the boards, and put that house together. In fact, built the entire house exactly according to the plans that I had drawn. There wasn't even a nail or screw missing. It even blew the paint out of the paint cans, mixed it, and put on three coats and the decorative trimmings

without splashing a drop. Then that cyclone went to town and visited the art store and came back with pictures with which it decorated the walls of every room in the house. Hung every picture straight and without breaking a glass. But there was one thing about it that I never have been able to figure out. That's this: even granting that that cyclone mixed the cement and poured sand and stone in the right proportions for concreting the foundation and cellar floor, how did that cyclone make the cement set in time to support the weight of the house? The whole thing was done in five minutes, you know.' "

I wanted to give you a sampling of some of the different kinds of stories used by the newspapers; most of the stories that I have used up to this time having been of the tall-tale variety. I did read and collect some other stories. One or two of them are about the experiences of the pioneers as they came into the territory. We know that the wagon trains often traveled the Santa Fe Trail to carry freight to Santa Fe. Supplies for the wagon trains and overland stages were procured at one of the starting points west--such as Atchison, Westport or Independence. This story comes from Atchison.

"Being the starting point west for the Overland-California stage coaches in the '60's, Atchison actually furnished many interesting incidents. During the period of four-horse Concord stages there, one of the Overland boys visited a prominent drug store on Commercial Street to have a few drugs, medicine, and so forth, put up. The customer had a memorandum from which he called one by one the articles as he wanted them. And to each one he inquired for, the druggist, whom we will call Jim Gould, for short, nodded in the affirmative and promptly put it up to the customer. 'Now,' said the anxious Overlander, as he had reached the bottom of his list, 'I want something that I don't think can be found in Atchison.'

'Well, what is it?' inquired Jim, the druggist, anxiously.

'Well, I want a half pint of rattlesnake oil.'

'Oh, I've got it,' quickly answered Jim; 'I always keep it, never allow myself to be out of it.'

'Well, glad to hear it, but I thought I would have to send to St. Louis or Chicago for it,' said the customer, greatly pleased to know that he could get such an important article so near home.

Jim took a half-pint bottle, went into the back room, and in a few minutes returned with the customer's rattlesnake oil. Jim filled the customer's order and wrapped up everything neatly in a secure package, and the Overland customer paid the bill and departed. He had not been gone fifteen seconds before Jim turned around with a smile that was child-like and bland and said to me, the only person in the room besides himself, 'I never allow myself to be out of anything when running a drug store. I have

everything that is wanted. I draw lard oil, bear's oil, and rattlesnake oil out of one and the same barrel.' "

There were lots of stories about the prohibition era, of course. One distinguished Kansas lawyer found himself out of beer one Saturday night and decided he'd have to go out and get some. It was in the days when one had to sign up and allege it was for medical, mechanical, or scientific purposes. The druggist had the beer, but he insisted that the purchaser must sign up, and he asked what disease he should put on the affidavit. Bill, the lawyer, studied awhile. He never had had anything but the mumps and the measles, and he wasn't sure that beer was the specific for either. A bright though struck him. "You have the right to sell for mechanical purposes," said he.

"Yes," said the druggist.

"Well, I want this for mechanical purposes."

So the druggist filled out the affidavit for mechanical purposes. Bill got the beer and was leaving, when the druggist said, "By the way, what mechanical purposes do you use beer for?"

Bill fixed the beer under his arm, looked the druggist firmly in the eye, and said, "I want it to grease a buggy with."

Now to change the subject slightly. I think many of us, in our study of Kansas or any pioneer region, forget too often about the women. I did a radio program this winter on three stories I had collected about women, because I think sometimes they get slighted in discussions. This is a woman who should be of interest to you because she came from this territory.

Charles H. Withington was Lyon County's first settler, having located on the Santa Fe Trail on June, 1854, where he established a store, the first in this county and the first in Southern Kansas not connected with the Indian post. Withington's, during 1855 and 1856, was the headquarters for most of the immigrants who came to this section of the territory. Mr. Withington helped the new people find claims. He acted as guide, and he often neglected his own business to assist a newcomer. He came to Kansas in 1853, settled at Council Grove, and ran the store for the Santa Fe Trail Indian trade. An interesting story is told about how Mrs. Withington saved the family's money from the notorious Anderson gang of robbers. Mr. Withington, before leaving home one morning on business, told Mrs. Withington he disliked to leave her alone, as he had heard that the Andersons were headed in their direction and there was no telling whom they would swoop down upon. Mrs. Withington said she could manage them and that she wasn't afraid. She was washing that day and her wash tub was in a narrow strip of shade made by the cabin, when she saw the little band on horseback coming over the hill. She knew them personally, and when the leader ordered her to prepare dinner for them, she replied, "Mr. Anderson,

you have eaten many a good meal in my house, for which you have been welcome. But I take no orders from you or any other man. When you ask me respectfully and decently to get dinner for you, I'll do it, and not before." The leader apologized and politely asked Mrs. Withington if she would prepare dinner for him and his men. She got up the best dinner she could, and after the meal, the leader said:

"Now Mrs. Withington, we'll have no more fooling. I want that bag of gold that is hidden around about this place. And I'm going to have it, and the quicker you get it for me, the better it will be for you."

"Well, help yourself," she said. "But don't expect me to assist you in your search."

For a long time the robbers searched, ripping over featherbeds and pillows, emptying the fronts of drawers, tearing up the carpet, while Mrs. Withington calmly went on with her washing. Finally the men threatened her, telling her she would have to tell them where the gold was hidden, or they would not be responsible for the consequences. She looked the leader straight in the eye. "You call yourself a brave man," she said, "yet you threaten a defenseless woman. Go ahead, shoot me if you wish, but I will not tell you where to find that gold."

It was getting late, and the robbers feared that Mr. Withington might come, accompanied by other men, and would put up a fight, so they left after Mrs. Withington defied them. After Mr. Withington arrived, Mrs. Withington lifted the bag of gold from the bottom of the washtub, where it had been all this time, under dirty suds and soiled clothing.

The examination of the traditional stories in Kansas reveals that in the 100 years since the territory has been organized, much has been told and written concerning the struggles of the territory towards statehood—the border warfares, the bad men and the sheriffs and other famous or eccentric characters who have become legendary figures, the cowtowns and their colorful inhabitants and exciting history, the foreign settlement groups who brought with them their customs and stories from the old country, ghost towns and county seat fights. The elements which played an important part in the early settlers' struggle of survival against the hazardous life on the prairie also became a basis for storytelling. These tales became tall about the grasshopper plagues, cyclones, drouths, floods, and Indian skirmishes. The crops and the animal life also provided additional material for the fellow who liked to spin a good yarn or, perhaps, a tall one. As these stories were told over and over, some found their way into the newspaper columns, obtaining their folktale characteristic and anonymity as to authorship. Still other yarns, especially those dealing with the personal experiences and adventures, appeared in diaries, journals, and volumes of reminiscences written by the early day settlers. County historians picked up

accounts of the most interesting little episodes and characters to include in their volumes. Thus many of these traditional stories and tales have survived in the written literature of the state and many others are still preserved by oral transmission only. The place-name legends, and the legends and myths of the Indians, and legendary folk heroes of the region are important aspects of the folktale—they also might be discussed.

In any event, the stories that I have told you are native anecdotes, the tall tales, the animal stories, the human experiences, the adventure stories, the pioneer episodes. An examination of the tales shows that the subject matter deals with objects that are familiar to the settlers—the crops, the town, rattlesnakes, jackrabbits and the vicious weather. Also a study of the tales will indicate that undoubtedly some of the stories were brought by those who came to settle, or the trappers, or the pioneers going through the state to regions farther west, as some of the tales seem to be variations of the long familiar folk tales of other regions of the United States and other countries. But whatever their origin, these stories provide entertainment now, as they did when they were first told, and they lead to an understanding and appreciation of Kansas and Kansans. Many of them reveal certain characteristics of the people who settled in Kansas. For example, they indicate that the settler often made a brave approach to a hard way of life. Instead of enduring with a martyr's air what happened to him, he smiled at these hardships, took a reverse in fortune as a joke, and passed it off as a minor annoyance. In order to endure the extreme adversity of life on the prairies, the settler learned to ignore difficulty or to transform it into an advantage. The tales he told helped in his adjustment to pioneer life. Finally, in order to combat the adversity of pioneer life, the settler developed such characteristics as self-reliance, integrity, energy, loyalty, faith in the future, a love of pranks and practical jokes, courage, pride, and appreciation of the simple things of life. As a result, people such as these won out over the adversities, and they were instrumental in the development of Kansas as a prosperous state. I'm glad I've become a Kansan!

Vol. 1, No. 1, *Men Against The Frontier,* February, 1957:
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Vol. 2, No. 4, *Kansas: Study in Contrasts,* November, 1958:
Vol. 3, No. 1, *Kansans Talk Tall,* February, 1959:

Neil Byer, "Kansans Talk Tall."

Mary Francis White, "Tall Tales in Kansas Newspapers."