

# The Grasshopper Years

I was recently asked if I knew of the greatest disaster in Martin County's history. Although I'm not certain of what might be considered the greatest disaster in the history of the county, I am aware of the grasshopper infestation of the 1870's and the effect it had on crops and gardens of that time. The following is an account of that event based on information in the Pioneer Museum in Fairmont.

In early June of 1873, it was reported that grasshoppers, also referred to as Rocky Mountain locusts, were working their way toward Minnesota from the Dakotas and destroying everything. Although people in this area at that time paid little credence to the threat, it was reported that the insects reached Jackson County by June 8, 1873. If the wind was favorable they could make ten miles in one day.

By June 18, 1873, they arrived in Martin County like a snowstorm until the ground was nearly covered. They took a special liking to the English Colony's beans, and it was said that within 24 hours there wasn't a beanstalk left standing. Some farmers of that time grew tobacco, which was also a favorite of the grasshoppers. The grasshoppers were content to eat the tobacco and then sit on the fences while squirting tobacco juice on the ground. In addition, the grasshoppers ate off the leaves of the cornstalks and other grains. It was estimated that  $\frac{1}{4}$  to  $\frac{1}{2}$  of the grain crop was salvaged; however, the gardens were a total loss.

Many thought the grasshoppers would not survive the harsh winter. However, the following April they began to hatch. In June there were two days of heavy rain. It was predicted that this would finish the grasshoppers. But when the storm subsided, they were out in force and ready for business. By the end of June, they had cleaned out many fields of grain, including beans, corn, and even potatoes.

Many settlers of that time began to lose faith in the future of the country and left. Finally, in the spring of 1877, Governor Pillsbury set April 27, 1877, as a day of fasting and prayer for deliverance from the pests. People gathered in their respective places of worship and joined in prayer. In the early summer of that year, when the grasshoppers had developed to the point

where they could fly, they all at once rose up to the sky and left the area. Sailors on the Great Lakes and Atlantic Ocean were said to have found insects floating on the water. They had left this area without depositing any eggs, and thus ended the grasshopper years.