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Lifecapades: Revelations of Generations

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Lifecapades

Revelations of Generations



EDITED BY

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The Prairie Dog Safari

By Glen E. Drake

Life was simple in 1948. There were two basic rules: Be ready for breakfast at 6 a.m. and be home for supper at 6 p.m. Each morning I walked three blocks to my parent's business, the High Plains Clothing Store, to sweep the floor and carry the trash to the incinerator. For this highly skilled labor, I was paid 50 cents a week, most of which I was saving to buy a Red Ryder BB gun.

One morning after I had finished my work, my friend Jerry came walking up the alley. Jerry was two years older than I was, but I was an inch taller. However, he assured me from time to time he could beat me to a pulp whenever he wanted.

I was very prosperous for an eight-year-old, in part because of my job at the store. I owe much of my prosperity to the business Jerry and I carried on as partners. The local cafés and grocery stores paid two cents for a soda bottle, three cents for a beer bottle, and five cents for a quart beer bottle.

"I know where we can pick up a lot of bottles," he said.

"Yeah, where?" I asked from my perch in the shade on the platform.

"Out on the road going down to Ben Slow's barn. My dad and I went out to look at a dog, and we saw Billy Axelson asleep in his model T. There were bottles all over the place."

"Let's go!"

Jerry and I went to the local grain elevator and when no one was looking, borrowed a gunnysack. Then we walked the roads just outside the city limits where the fast crowd of young people had their Saturday night parties. In the summer, my share from our private venture was twice my wages at the clothing store.

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After we turned in our bottles and collected our money, we went to the hotel-café. We slid into a booth and each ordered a Baby Ruth candy bar and a bottle of Royal Crown Cola. After the waitress delivered our candy bars and soda, we had a brief belching contest and then got down to business.

Jerry and I were going to expand our ventures into the prairie dog hunting. Jerry's older brother, Bob, had told us there was a bounty on prairie dogs. The county conservation agent would pay a dollar for each dead prairie dog we could deliver.

"Dad says I have to wait until my birthday in October to get the BB gun. By that time it will be too late to hunt prairie dogs," I said.

"You couldn't kill a prairie dog with BB gun anyway," Jerry scoffed. "If we want to shoot prairie dogs, we should use my dad's .22 rifle."

"Does it have ammunition in it?"

"No. It's a single shot, short barreled .22, and you have to load it every time you fire."

I rolled my Baby Ruth between my thumb and two fingers and bit off the end as if I had a cigar as we concocted our plan. We had never seen Jerry's dad use the rifle and assumed he didn't have any shells. I would take some of my savings and buy a box, and Jerry would sneak his dad's rifle out the back door. We would meet on the railroad track and hike the mile and half west to prairie dog town.

After lunch, I went to the hardware store and asked for a box of .22 shorts. My father had a .22 caliber pistol, and he practiced target shooting on weekends. He frequently sent me to the hardware store to buy ammunition before we went to the range.

"Are you sure you want shorts? You usually get longs," the clerk said.

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“We got a rifle. It’ll take a long or a short. I want the cheap ones.”

“Merlin has never complained about the price of longs,” he said, as he walked to the cash register.

I just smiled. This was my money and I never actually said I was buying these shells for my dad. He put the box in a small brown sack, counted out my change and thanked me for shopping at Welling’s Hardware Store. I walked over to the railroad track to find Jerry waiting with his dad’s single shot .22.

“Did you have any trouble getting the shells?” Jerry asked.

“No. Rex wanted to sell me longs, but I said they were too expensive.”

“Damn,” he said, shaking his head, “You can get away with anything. They wouldn’t let me buy bullets; I tried once.”

It was a typically hot August day in north central Kansas. The temperature in the shade was 90, but there was a light breeze. A train track ran straight across the state from Kansas City to Denver and our thriving little town was on the Plainville branch. Prairie dog town was about 200 yards south of the railroad crossing on the county line road. The county line road was at least a twenty-minute walk from town down the tracks under the blazing sun.

We walked along the tracks and over the railroad bridge that crossed a small stream marking the west edge of town. I carried the gun on my shoulder. Jerry was the captain, and I was the sergeant, as we led twenty imaginary soldiers across the plains. Buzzards circled lazily in the sky anticipating our demise.

As we crossed the fence that separated the pasture from the road, I realized we had forgotten a gunnysack for carrying our kill back to the conservation agent. We marched on anyway.

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“The first rule of hunting is doing let the game smell you coming,” Jerry said.

Soon we were in the pasture standing downwind of about thirty prairie dog mounds. The prairie dogs, their golden coats grayed with dirt, were standing next to their holes. They looked at us and chattered nervously to one another.

We crouched down and followed a shallow ravine, advancing to within twenty yards of the closest prairie dog. Neither of us were experienced marksmen, but we knew this was about as close as we were going to get to them. Jerry thought we could easily pick them off at this distance.

We knelt down and looked around for the closest target. We spotted a large, noisy prairie dog straight north of us. Jerry, being the captain and owner of the gun, claimed the first shot. I took a shell out of the box and gave it to him. He loaded the gun, locked the action, and cocked the hammer. He took careful aim and slowly squeezed the trigger. Crack! The gun fired. The prairie dog disappeared.

“I hit him! I knocked him right down the hole.”

We jumped up and ran toward the mound. We looked down the hole, but there was no prairie dog.

“I must have wounded him, and he ran off.”

I looked at the hole. “There’s no blood, Jerry.”

“Maybe I just grazed him.”

We looked around. Prairie dog holes surrounded us. About forty feet away several prairie dogs stood taunting us with chirps and barks. Clearly, we should be able to hit these foot tall daredevils.

Jerry put his hand out for another round of ammunition. I handed him a shell. He flipped open the action like a pro and the spent cartridge fell to the ground. He slipped in his second round, assumed a wide stance and aimed at the closest prairie dog. He squeezed the trigger and fired. The prairie dog plunged

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into its hole as a sprit of gray dust arose several yards beyond the mound.

He held out his hand again, reloaded, aimed, and fired. A short column of dust jumped up as the prairie dog again ducked down into its hole.

I held my hand out for the gun. "It's my turn."

Jerry made a face, but handed me the rifle. It was mid afternoon and the temperature was closing in on 100 degrees. I could see heat waves rising off the black ground. A rattlesnake seeking shade slithered past us.

I took careful aim, dead center on the prairie dog, and pulled the trigger. The column of dust showed I had fired too high. I worked the action and shoved in a new round. This time I aimed at the feet of the prairie dog. I missed again, still too high. Jerry wanted the gun back.

"Just one more shot and it's your turn," I said.

I jammed a round in the chamber, snapped the rifle to my shoulder, and pulled the trigger. This time the jet of dust was right beside the prairie dog as he dove into his hole.

The afternoon wore on. Neither of us had imagined that hunting prairie dogs would be so time consuming and frustrating. Our supply of ammunition was dwindling and so was our enthusiasm. It was the same thing repeatedly. Our shots got closer and closer, but the prairie dogs now stayed down in their holes longer and did not pop up as near to us as they had before. They became more cautious as we learned how to aim the rifle.

"I'm done shooting," I said. I was hot, thirsty, and hungry. Each lick of my lips brought with it the taste of salt and dirt. Sweat trickled down my face and neck and my shirt, wet with perspiration, kept sticking to my back. I pointed out to Jerry that we had no good way to carry anything we might hit and suggested that we call it off and come back better prepared

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next time. I handed Jerry the last few rounds. He put one in the gun and the rest in his pocket. As we walked away, Jerry turned and fired a parting shot.

“Stupid prairie dogs,” he shouted.

The railroad track ran east-west down a little valley cut by the Paradise Creek. Trees grew along the creek, providing a cool and welcome shade. Tired and discouraged, we slid down the bank and splashed the murky water on our faces, then continued the journey home. I smiled when I thought about how close we came on some of those last shots we fired. Maybe I should have bought the longs. If we had thought to bring a jug of water, some sandwiches, an extra box of shells, and a gunnysack, it might have worked.

We stopped to rest again as we approached the bridge over the stream on the west side of town. Some kids we knew had setup a sack swing just west of where the stream emptied into Paradise Creek and were swinging from one steep bank to the next.

Jerry waved the gun around while he was talking to the girls who were riding the swing. I knew he was just showing off.

“Don’t point the gun at other people. You don’t know if it’s loaded or not.”

He gave me sour look. “It’s not loaded, and you’re not the damn boss.”

“It looks loaded to me.”

The gun was closed so there really was no way to see if it was loaded.

“You always think you know everything.” Jerry looked furious. He pointed the rifle at the ground in front of my foot and pulled the trigger. There was a sharp report and a hole appeared in the ground barely above the tip of my shoe.

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I could not believe what had just happened. I sucked in a huge gulp of air and blurted out, “You’re a total idiot!”

Jerry had a wild look in his eyes, but just shrugged his shoulders. “You better keep your mouth shut,” he said as he turned and walked on down the tracks in a huff.

I cut across the field and went to my grandma’s house. She fed me a cold ham sandwich, lemonade and some fudge.

“My, what have you been doing to get so tired and dirty?”

“Oh, Jerry and I have been playing on the sack swing down by the railroad bridge with the Doughty girls.”

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