

## RATTLESNAKES

Creatures, those that ran and those that slithered; the things that crawled over you in the night; the things that growled in the brush, or made no noise in the darkness that you knew were there nonetheless. These were an aspect of frontier Wisconsin life, and they are coming back. First, the rattlesnake:

The snake is an enemy of ancient repute. It bears the stigma of introducing mankind to sin. The snakes that administer venomous bites and those that constrict are the stuff of bad dreams. Compared to Asia and Australia, Wisconsin is a paradise. We have only two types of venomous snakes in Wisconsin: the Timber Rattler (*Crotalus horridus*) also called the banded rattler or yellow rattler, which may be up to 5 1/4 feet in length, and the Massasauga Rattler (*Sistrurus catenatus*), also known as the black rattler, which grows to a length of up to 30 inches. The Timber rattler is the more dangerous of the two, and is found only in western and southwest Wisconsin along the Wisconsin and Mississippi rivers and their tributaries. Rattlesnakes are good swimmers and can climb trees and buildings. They do not travel more than a mile from their winter den. Rattlesnakes do not always rattle before striking.

In 1837 Captain Frederick Marryat, and English author, traveled down the Wisconsin River on a keelboat. A. W. Schorger in his essay *Rattlesnakes in Early Wisconsin* (1967) wrote: **“He (Maryatt) considered it dangerous to wander far from the bank because of the rattlesnakes. He believed that there was probably no place in America where the two species of rattlesnakes were larger and more numerous than in Wisconsin.”** In the Potosi area, also known as Snake Hollow, a traveler, after killing a rattlesnake was told **“the woods are full of them!”** In Grant County, timber rattlesnakes were reported in the towns of Cassville, Hazel Green, Potosi, Waterloo, and Wyalusing. The massasauga was documented in the towns of Cassville, and Fennimore, and they must have occurred more widely than that in the early days before the land was cleared and domesticated animals such as the pig were introduced.

**"In the western part of Michigan, and in the Wisconsin Territory, a species of rattlesnake abounds, which is smaller than the ordinary yellow rattlesnake, and of a hue almost approaching to black. They are very venomous in some places on the banks of the Wisconsin; the numbers of these reptiles have decreased astonishingly since hogs have been introduced by the settlers. Swine declare war against them, never ending war, and hunt them for the sake of their carcasses, which they consider a great delicacy. And what is singular, the bite of the snake-seems to have- no-injurious effect on the hog—who never hesitates about attacking one of the largest size. He seizes the reptile by the middle with his teeth, and in spite of all his writhings, and hisses, and bites, soon tears him to pieces, 'and devours him with all the apparent relish of an epicure!'"** —New England Farmer, and Horticultural Register, Volume 18, 1840.



Massasauga Rattlesnake



Timber Rattlesnake

Reverend Edward Matthews, an early abolitionist preacher who traveled widely in Southwest Wisconsin, would not have considered playing with rattlesnakes, as he wrote in 1838: **"Wolves and rattlesnakes were my only antagonists. The former will not approach a fire, and the latter always give warning before they bite. They are readily killed by a stroke across the back with a switch—I have thus killed many of them, considering that by so doing I might be saving someone's life."** Some of Matthews fellow believers of a later day have come to believe it is necessary to take up the serpent.

In the early days of Wisconsin agriculture wheat was king. The constant risk of encountering a rattlesnake kept harvesters on edge. It wasn't uncommon for a rattlesnake to take up residence in a pile (gavel) of unbundled wheat, or for a farmhand to find that he had been thrown a snake as well as a bundle of grain. As an example: **"While about to bind up a gavel , John Mosely found that a rattlesnake had insinuated itself into the straw and the load was dropped with wonderful quickness."** Or **"Rising quite early one morning I went into the garden yard and took up an armload of newly mown grass to feed the cows. I had walked about four rods with it when I heard a familiar 'bizz' and dropping the bundle of grass I beheld a large black rattler. I had pressed him against my breast with his head brushing my face."** (In this account the author sought to demonstrate the forbearance of the rattlesnake, which prefers flight to bite.)



Wheat Harvesting about 1910

The numbers of rattlesnakes in Southwest Wisconsin in the past is something to take note of. At Dodgeville in 1878 48 young rattlers were found under one rock and were killed. The thought of protecting the vexing creatures in the 19th and early 20th centuries would have been considered absurd. Mountain Lions were hunted to extinction in Wisconsin by 1857, though that date is disputed. Wolves and rattlesnakes were hunted for the bounties. Wolves were eliminated and the rattlesnake population was greatly reduced. This led to state protected species status for the Massasauga in 1975, and the Timber Rattler in 1997. To those who lived close to the land it would have been incomprehensible to protect such dangerous and numerous creatures. In 1964 and 1965 Crawford County paid bounties for over 10,000 Timber Rattlers in each year.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century the most popular treatment for snakebite was alcohol – lots of it, sometimes combined with various herbal substances. A.W. Schorger told of the self-administered treatment of one farmer: **"A man at Fennimore, bitten by a massasauga .while binding grain, underwent heroic treatment. When questioned by Bishop Kemper, he replied that after reaching the house he drank half a pint of alcohol and camphor, then a quart of whiskey, followed by a quart of pure alcohol, and all this with no symptoms of intoxication. The following morning he drank a pint of alcohol and swallowed a quarter pound of finely cut tobacco boiled in milk."** One would have imagined that the snake posed a smaller risk than the treatment. The farmer lived. Modern physicians will endorse no treatment as being effective except antivenin.

There are more reasons than one to take up venomous snakes. Until 1975 some locals made cash on the side by hunting timber rattlers for the bounties paid by Grant and other counties. One of the best of these was Virgil Pittsley of Boscobel, a lumber buyer who spent his free hours climbing the bluffs to capture or kill the snakes in their dens under huge rock outcroppings. For the bounty, he killed them. For zoos and researchers he captured them. He claimed to have bagged over 100,000 of them. He considered them devils, but like any snake hunter who wanted to prosper, he respected them. Milking one for a reporter, he watched a four foot long stream of venom erupt from the fangs and said "Phew, does that stuff stink!" He told of a cow bitten on the nose whose head swelled to the size of a bushel basket, and of a farmer bitten while crawling under a fence. He had no liking for State beaucrats who "tell us what to do."



Virgil Pittsley in 1977



← Jamie Coots

The other reason for taking up the snake is religion. In the hills of West Virginia members of Church of God and Pentecostal congregations take up poisonous snakes to fulfill the "full word" of God. They cite, among other passages of the Bible Mark 16:18 which says: **"They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover."** Mark 16:18 (KJV). God says it, so that is exactly what they do. Recently Pastor Jamie Coots died when bitten in a service where he was handling poisonous snakes. He wasn't the first. In 1983 Mack Wolford of Phelps Kentucky died of a snakebite in church.

As he lay dying on a mattress in the church others prayed and sang. "Two minutes before he died, he was joyful" his minister Brady Dawson said. "He was 100 percent God." The fact is, most of those who handle poisonous snakes expect to die from snakebite, but every bite is not fatal. Woodford had been bitten three times before the fatal strike. Another legend among those who take up the snake is Dewey Chafin, who in 1995 claimed to have been bitten 118 times. He is now 82 and his bite number is over 200. Obviously it is possible to build up a tolerance for venom, "I always figure God will take care of me" he says. "If he wants you to die you'll die. If he wants you to live you'll live....That's the way I'd like to die. It's really the only way I can think of." These religious snake handlers do not usually call for medical attention when they are bitten.

Dewey Chafin →

Unique in the snakebite league is the home collector. Apparently it is possible to buy almost any kind of poisonous serpent and keep it in your home, so if Wisconsin is a relative paradise vis-à-vis poisonous snakes you can be sure some fool is working to remedy the situation. In April 2011 22-year old Jeremy Loveland of St. Francis, Wisconsin was bitten on the hand by an African Gaboon Viper which he kept in his bedroom along with another Gaboon Viper, three cobras, a temple viper, eight western diamond back rattlesnakes, a pattern-less black krait, and a number of non-venomous snakes. His neighbor explained that he just loved snakes. He survived the bite after receiving treatment. In May of 2012 Andrew Philson of Columbia, Wisconsin discovered a large 15-20 foot snake in his back yard (see photo below) which the DNR refused to remove, labeling it a harmless black rat snake. Philson said "I've seen a rat snake and they don't get that big." In May 2013 Kenosha police were called to a home containing five rattlesnakes, a Gila Monster, two alligators and a crocodile. Lastly we must take note of Tim Friede of Milwaukee, who keeps a large hoard of lethal serpents in his basement. He has allowed himself to be bitten over 100 times on purpose to build immunity. He recently reached the mountaintop by forcing a black mamba to bite him and living through the experience (photo below). That raises the question "what's in your neighborhood?"

