

NEBRASKA FOLKLORE PAMPHLETS

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TALL TALES

Number Thirteen

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These tales have been collected from old newspapers, other publications, and pioneer contributions. They have been titled, edited, and reconstructed as occasion seemed to demand. The stories taken from The Prairie Schooner and The Nebraska Farmer are offered by permission of these publications.

THE MYSTERIOUS LAKE MONSTER

Since long before the time of Old Jules, a monster sea-serpent has inhabited Alkali (Walgren) Lake a few miles southeast of Hay Springs. He is one of the few inland sea serpents in the world. Sometime down through the years, possibly to distinguish him from other sea serpents known for their phenomenal performances, he acquired the name of Giganticus Brutervious.

So formidable is Giganticus that when he comes to the surface of the water, the earth trembles, and the skies cloud over. Those who have been brave enough and strong enough to endure a glance at him say that his flashing green eyes spit fire, that with a head like a huge oil barrel, he looks like something one sees in a very bad dream, and that the least movement of his big pointed ears causes a tempest on the lake.

As he rears and flips his powerful tail, the farmers become seasick for miles around. When he comes ashore to devour his daily ration of a dozen calves, a mist arises so thick that travelers cannot make their way through it, and his flashing eyes color the mist a murky green. The gnashing of his teeth sounds like clap after clap of thunder.

Unbelievers sometimes shake their heads at these tales told of Giganticus, but there is scarcely a fisherman of northwestern Nebraska who will not vouch for the truth of Giganticus' existence. Once an Omaha skeptic decided to learn the truth. He went out alone to spend a night at Walgren Lake. Next morning he staggered into Hay Springs haggard and worn. His hair had turned white. Not until three days later, when he had regained his voice, was he able to tell what he saw. He said that the monster was 300 feet long, and that when it yawned, the opening of its mouth was large enough to hold the Woodmen of the World Building.

Others estimate the monster's length at 100 feet though a Grand Island paper said: "No one who has seen it estimates its length at over 20 feet." However this may be, all agreed that he swallowed a small island that used to be in the lake.

Many efforts to capture him have been made without avail; bullets from high-powered rifles bounce from his hide. At one time, a concerted action was considered to catch the monster. The townspeople estimated the cost of dragging the lake at approximately \$1,000. The landowners however asked \$4000 for a three month's lease of the lake and adjacent land, and the Investigation Association would not agree to this price.

Giganticus has not been seen lately. Some say that bored with life, he has gone through the bottom of the lake into hibernation in some underground retreat.

Some think this amphibious monster resembling a prehistoric dinosaur has turned into a mermaid because a mermaid was found frozen in the ice. The inhabitants of the lake shores are glad the mermaid was captured for as everyone knows, fish will not thrive or propagate in water infested with mermaids.

Editor's Note:

Since the time of the first settlements around Alkali Lake, stories have been extant concerning a monster which inhabited the lake. The stories spread far, reaching foreign countries in both picture and tale. The following is a quotation from The London Times. "By far the most vivid picture of the actions and features of a medieval monster which for three years has been terrifying the natives of the vicinity of Alkali Lake near the small town of Hay Springs, Nebraska, U.S.A., was received by our Omaha, Nebraska correspondent, today."

Old Jules complained that the New York papers were full of accounts of the monster's depredations and atrocities. He says, "Eastern people don't know better. They may believe them." However, he found the stories entertaining, as may be seen from the following quotation from Old Jules: "Alkali Lake, near Hay Springs, where the early sky pilots dipped their converts, was inhabited by a sea monster--with a head like an oil barrel, shiny black in the moonlight. Some thought it a survival of the coal age. But Johnny Burrows and other fundamentalists of the Flats knew better. The same devil that scattered the fossil bones over the earth to confound those of little faith could plant a sea monster among the sinners.

"Real estate must be moving slow on the Flats,' Jules laughed. When Andy came in, he asked if he had seen anything of the monster. The little grub-line rider took the jew's harp from between his leathery lips. 'No, cain't say's I has, but I seen lots o' the stuff them fellahs as sees 'im drinks.'"

The correspondent mentioned in the London Times is a doubtless John G. Maher of Lincoln who explains this and other yarns, such as the Petrified man and The Minnick-Fit Springs, as follows: "The East felt a great interest in the far West with its Indian fighters, its unexplored territory, its bad lands, and wonders of nature. There was a great demand for stories and a few things to write about so, for an inventive mind there was nothing to do but make up the stories."

The local people believed in the actual existence of the monster, though the Hay Springs investigation Association was possibly organized chiefly as a money-making venture. The dragging of the lake, which was the Association's purpose, would have attracted many thousand sightseers to the spot, and admission could be charged. The owners of land, aware of this, asked

so high a figure for leasing the ground that the enterprise was abandoned.

Mr. J.E. Gilmore of Hay Springs says that "letters were received from all parts of the world regarding the sea monster. One expert fisher from California wanted to make a trip to try to capture the animal, and some of the people here were ready to put on the show; the conservatives, however, did not want the thing carried too far."

THE PETRIFIED MAN

One day in the year 1892, Ed Rossiter and his brother were digging for fossils in the bad lands where students from the University of Nebraska had previously dug. In the course of his digging, Ed encountered something hard, and found it to be the hand of a man. He called his brother, Clyde, to guard the discovery, while he himself set off to Chadron for help. A party returning from Chadron dug up the body and loaded it on a wagon and took it to town. That night, after partially washing the clay from the body, they placed it on exhibition at the Rossiter Hotel.

The body weighed almost 700 pounds. It was in perfect condition except for two fingers on the right hand, the right ear, the point of the nose, and a portion of the abdomen. The eyes were closed, and a look of pain distorted the countenance. Parted lips exposed two teeth. The body lay on the right side, legs drawn up slightly in a natural sleeping position, the arms folded across the breast. Finger nails and toe nails were perfect, as were the wrinkles and pores of the skin. The face resembled that of a Negro, although the arch of the foot and the shapely heel appeared Caucasian.

No human skeleton has ever been found in so early a geologic formation. It lay solidly imbedded in a green stratum of Miocene clay. The body must originally have been 200 feet below the surface. Above the green stratum, the face of the cliff showed twenty-four strata of sedimentary deposits, indicating the immense antiquity of the find. There were also three layers of rock above this stratum; one of agate, the others of sandstone. Local geologists thought this stratum was deposited at least a million years before. In all probability, the man was buried while the deposit was yet soft. There were no signs of volcanic disturbance in the area, nor had a landslide in modern geologic times buried the victim. Such a landslide would have disturbed the stratum where the body lay.

Editor's Note:

Doubtless the search for fossils near Chadron inspired the story of The Petrified Man. To satisfy the imaginations of visiting Easterners, this hoax was perpetrated, surprising not only the Easterners but native Nebraskans as well.

We quote Mr. John G. Maher: "I brought in a huge negro private from Fort Robinson as a model, and a very clever craftsman from Chadron made a cement body of a man, filling in the arches of the feet to make them flat like a pre-historic specimen and making the figure so exact that even the hairs showed on his shins. He lay in a position of repose, arms crossed over the chest. We hauled him out in a dray wagon and buried him in the bad lands not far from where Professor Hatcher of the Smithsonian Institute was conducting some explorations. We so planted him that

rain would wash enough away from his position to incite interest, and then after a spell of 'favorable' weather, one Sunday afternoon the archaeologists found him. It was a marvelous discovery, and after much investigation, Professor Hatcher pronounced him a petrified man. He was exhibited all over the country in the street fairs and carnivals and was finally sold for \$4,500. Mr. Daniel Webster Sperling of Chadron took him 'on tour,' and finally laid him to rest after he had paid his way on this earth in a vault in an Illinois town and from where we hoped to move him to Nebraska again, but found upon inquiry, that Illinois people wanted to charge a dollar a year for his 'keep' and that plus the freight charges would be more than he was worth. That story provided me with columns for weeks."

CYCLONES

So freakish are cyclones, as every westerner knows, that it takes a real storyteller to make a tall tale out of a cyclone story. We offer the following tales with their introduction, but with our own titles, by permission of The Prairie Schooner in which publication these yarns appeared several years ago.

CYCLONE YARNS (George L. Jackson)

People of the effete east, do not, as a rule, understand the tornadoes of the "States of the Plains." When New Englanders or New Yorkers read newspaper accounts of a western tornado in which straws are alleged to have been driven through trees, or the feathers plucked from a flock of chickens, they are inclined to raise their doubts as to the reporter's veracity.

Natives of the prairie states are numerous indeed who can vouch for the truthfulness of all the reported "freaks of the storm." Scientists have painstakingly investigated much meteorological data that tend to show conclusively that the "fishy" sounding newspaper stories are not the figments of disordered minds but rather are true incidents and of fairly common occurrence.

Although this article is entitled "Cyclone Yarns," the title is misleading. The events mentioned here are not "yarns" but are "gospel truths," each one being supported by authentic and scientific investigations. And although the term "cyclone" is used, this being the common terminology of the midwesterner, the true technical name for such an atmospheric phenomenon is "tornado."

A WHIRLWIND WITH A PERSONALITY

On April 30, 1888, a cyclone passed over Howard County, Nebraska. This cyclone was not of the mass of windstorms but was a whirlwind with a personality. The idiosyncrasy of the twister was its avidity for water. Every well, stream, and watering trough that happened to be in its path was sucked dry of its moisture and left as parched as if on the Sahara. Some wells were dry for weeks; the water in the creeks flowed into the dusty sands never to be seen again; even the cows for several days gave never a drop of milk.

GOOD JUGGLING

On July 12, 1900, a cyclone with distinct uprooting proclivities passed near Onawa, Iowa. Trees, grass, corn, alfalfa, every form of vegetation in its path was uprooted and left, for the most part, in tangled heaps and windrows. Striking exceptions were noted. One old oak had been uprooted without a leaf or twig being injured, carried through the air, and balanced upright on the roof of a barn over two miles away. Twenty bird's nests were counted in the tree but not an egg or a fledgling had been disturbed.

RIDING IN THE SKY

On the evening of May 7, 1903, a cyclone passed near the town of Valley Falls, Kansas. A farm woman of the community was just on the point of mounting her horse to go after the cows in a pasture a mile and a half away. As she raised her foot to the stirrup, the storm struck, and the good woman was hurled hundreds of feet into the air. For a moment, she soared about in the skies as gracefully as a dove on the wing. Soon her horse appeared at her side. She grasped the saddle horn and climbed on. A few moments later, horse and rider were set down, unhurt, among the cows in the pasture.

AN EXCELLENT BRUSH

Near the end of a sultry afternoon on August 16, 1910, a tornado passed near Hartwell, Nebraska. An agent for a patented scrub brush was demonstrating a sample of his wares at the door of a farm home when the storm struck, whirling him in the air, and removing, with the exception of the house, every stock and straw from the premises. The last gust of the storm dropped the agent once more at the farm house door. "As I was saying," he began, "This brush is a regular cyclone. It sweeps clean and does a thorough job."

WESTERN ECONOMY

On June 6, 1912, a cyclone passed over Stillwell, Oklahoma. One of the early settlers in the community had dug a wide deep well and had curbed the walls with pieces of native rock. Misfortune dogged the steps of the pioneer until the point was reached where the mortgage was due, and he was about to be dispossessed when the cyclone crossed his place; the "twister" pulled up the old well as a derrick would lift a straw and carried it several hundred feet where it was left firmly planted but inside, down near the farmer's barn. He plastered it inside and out and has used it ever since as a silo; from the old well gushed a geyser of oil. The farmer now has a summer home in the Adirondacks and a winter home in Palm Beach.

A REMARKABLE EPISODE

On July 13, 1913, a cyclone passed near Sweetwater, Nebraska. One of the members of the

Ladies' Aid Society was filling an ice cream freezer with the unfrozen constituents of that delicacy in preparation for the ice cream social at the church in town that evening. She had just clamped the lid down when the storm struck whisking the freezer from her hands and hurling it aloft. The freezer was found on the church steps, filled with hailstones, and the cream frozen to a turn.

THE LORD PROVIDES

On the 18th of May in 1916, a man near Scotland, South Dakota, had just put the finishing touches on a garage in preparation for a new Ford that he intended purchasing when one of the typical midwest cyclones appeared on the horizon. After the passage of the storm, he emerged from his cyclone cellar and was surprised to find in his garage a brand new Buick bearing a Kansas license tag.

FINESSE

On the tenth of April, 1917, a very freaky cyclone devastated a section of the country near Mason City, Nebraska. At one place, a farmer on the road with a wagon load of oats was picked up, wagon, team and all, and carried to Arcadia, twenty miles distant, where he was set down unhurt, team and wagon in good condition and not having lost an oat. At another place, a woman had a hundred prize-winning Black Langshan chickens from which the cyclone plucked every feather and pin-feather from every bird in the flock. None of the birds was killed, but the fact that their experience had been horrifying in the extreme was attested by the further fact that the feathers which grew later were snow-white. At another place, a farmer had just come in from a muddy field and was sitting with his feet in the oven of the kitchen range drying his socks and reading the daily newspaper. The cyclone blew the socks off the man's feet, carried the stove out the door and five miles over the hills but left everything else in the home untouched, not even tearing the newspaper that he held spread before him.

MORE ON CYCLONES

From the numerous tall tales published in the Nebraska Farmer we have culled the following yarns:

A BREECHY COW

In '98, we had a cyclone that did considerable damage. Among other capers, it rolled up 89 rods of barbed wire fence, posts and all, and set it on top of a row of cottonwood trees. We had a cow that was so breechy she used to climb those trees, go through that barbed wire fence and down the other side into the cornfield. I saw her do it time and again.

JUGGED

(Keith Wallace, Garden County)

One of the funniest things that a recent cyclone did in this community was to blow our chicken house away. After the storm, we all ran out to see about the chickens and found the only rooster we had in a half gallon jug with his head sticking out, and not even a crack in the jug. We had to break the jug to get him out and found the handle on the inside.

THE WHOLE TRUTH
(Mrs. J.A. Milliken, Aurora)

One afternoon a whirlwind swept into our yard, struck the bee hives, and played swing your partners right and left with the bees. Then it spun the windlass of the well around like a crank, and it followed the bucket and rope right down into the well. When the whirlwind reached the bottom, it shot the bucket sky high and blew the water out with a roar. The water fell a second later like a mighty cloudburst.

Pa found the old windlass blowed chuck full of bee stingers drove porcupine-fashion right into the wood. The well was bone dry and has never freshened since. The bucket was standing by the overturned bee hive and was full of clear strained honey.

MY UNCLE BING
(By J.H. Norris)

Although my uncle Bing was one of the pioneers of Nebraska, he was never bothered by the pests and other hardships of that day; always resourceful, he met every emergency with some telling resistance.

When fleas were making life miserable for his neighbors, my uncle Bing procured a kennel of one hundred and fifty wooly toy poodles that attracted every flea that was upon the ranch. He then shipped the whole carload of dogs and fleas to the city, where they found a ready market.

Even grasshoppers couldn't get the best of my uncle Bing. To get around the grasshopper trouble, he organized a polo team and set aside a border of ground twenty rods wide that ran clear around the farm for polo players to play polo on. Polo grew so much in favor among the homesteaders for miles around that everyone became polo conscious. Even the polo field itself became infected with the germ and when the grasshoppers attempted to cross it, they all got poliomyelitis. This paralyzed their legs and they couldn't hop over into the corn, oats, rye, barley and other crops on my uncle Bing's ranch.

..... A PREACHER TRIES FARMING; OR, WHY I DON'T LIKE SORGHUM OR ONIONS

My father was a Methodist preacher, and at one time was assigned to take charge of a small church at Indianola, Nebraska, when that country was being settled, our family arriving only one or two years later than the first pioneers, or about 1873.

There were mostly very poor people who came to try to make a living farming in that arid country, and father saw at the start that his followers would not be able to pay the preacher enough for him and his family to live on, so he took to farming as a side line, and located a homestead a mile south of the general store and post office of Indianola. Here he built a two-room house made of sod cut in ribbons three inches thick by twelve in width. The floor was the bare ground with the grass shaved off and tamped to make it firm to walk on. The doors were of boards cleated together and hung with leather hinges.

It was a happy day for all when father and I moved the cook stove from the covered wagon into our new home. We didn't have any table, but my pa was quite a genius; he went right to work and made one. He drove four stakes in the ground--all the proper height--and layed the front end gate of the wagon box on top of the stakes, and when mother spread the cloth on, you wouldn't know but what it was a beautiful table.

There were about five acres of land that had been plowed before by some settler who had abandoned the place before we came. Father hitched the oxen to the plow and stirred up this patch of earth. He planted part of it to garden vegetables for family use and the balance to onions and sorghum, about one half to each. The onions and sorghum were to sell to buy other necessities.

Then I drove the oxen on the breaking plow and turned over about two acres of sod land. This was planted to corn. Father would travel down every third furrow with an ax, and at every stop, strike the ax through the sod, and I went along with a bucket of corn and dropped four kernels in each hole made by the ax, and stomped it shut with my heel, until the field was all planted.

The season was favorable, and we raised a wonderful crop of everything. My brother and I did the most of the work. Father tended to his pastoral duties and worked with us at his spare time. We built a cellar in the backyard with a dirt roof in which to store the onions. We were all well and happy, plenty of vegetables stored in the cellar, corn for the oxen and cow, which were already fat from gorging on the buffalo grass. Corn meal for mush and johnny cake, which we ground as needed with a mortar and pestle. The cow gave a bucket of milk at a time, so we had plenty of milk to drink, cream for our mush and butter for our johnny cake.

Mother was an expert at making butter. We also had two dozen hens that were brought along in a crate tied on the back of the wagon. They seemed to be trying to see which could lay the most eggs.

There was a great pile of buffalo chips at one side of the house that us kids had gathered and piled there for winter fuel. We seemed to be enjoying the height of prosperity when, alas, several things happened to mar our happiness.

One day, our father opened the onion house to see how they were keeping and found they had heated and were starting to rot. Father didn't say any cuss words, just, "well, well, that's too bad."

He said something had to be done quick if we saved any of the onions. So we all went to work with a will, and in about a week, we had the job done, and we had saved about one half of them, but there were rotten onions scattered far and near. The chickens pecked at them, and it make their eggs taste like rotten onions, and the cow ate them and spoiled the milk and butter. So we didn't have cream for our mush or butter for our johnny cake. And father didn't say any cuss words, just, "well, well, that's too bad."

So he hays we'll harvest our cane, get it into sorghum, then we can have molasses on our johnny cake, and that won't be so bad. He set my brother and I stripping the leaves off the cane with sticks while he loaded some onions on the wagon and started out to find a market for them and get some barrels to put the molasses in. The store keeper at Indianola didn't want any onions, so father decided to go down the river to Arapahoe. He traded his load for twelve long boards and two small barrels.

When father got home, my brother and I had the cane all stripped and the seed tassels out from the tops, and father helped out the stalks which had to be kept from touching the ground and piled them on some leaves or seed tassels to keep them clean. Then we loaded them on the wagon and started for a sorghum mill which was one days' drive over prairie where there was no road.

About noon, we came to a dead carcass. The oxen stopped, smelled it, started to bellow and paw dirt, then bolted, and, one being a little faster runner than the other, they ran in a circle, and the cane being very slippery, it all lost off the wagon before father could get the oxen stopped. Father didn't say a cuss word, just says, "well, well, isn't that too bad." He brought the team and wagon to about the center of the scattered cane, unyoked the oxen, and turned them loose to graze while we went to work loading our cane. This took until dark when we made a dry camp for the night. We arrived at the mill at noon the next day. We made a bargain with the man who owned the mill to make the molasses for half if father would drive our oxen on the sweep to grind the cane and we boys would feed the stalks between the rollers. The owner of the mill was to do the boiling of the juice. We finished the next day, and the following morning, loaded our two little barrels of molasses and started for home. We hadn't traveled far when I noticed the bottom of the wagon box was nearly covered with molasses. Both barrels had sprung a leak. Father didn't cuss, he just said, "well, well, that sure is too bad." Then he urged the oxen to the top of their speed (which was about three miles per hour) in an effort to get home before all the sorghum leaked out, and when we arrived, we emptied one barrel into the other and had just enough to fill one barrel which we set over a washtub to catch the drip. Mother put a wash boiler of water over the fire to heat, soaked the empty barrel with hot water until it was tight again, then poured in the molasses from the other barrel together with what had leaked into the tub. Father had a spigot but no auger to bore a hole for it near the bottom of the barrel. So he put a rag around it and drove it in the bung hole, then all hands rolled it down into the vegetable cellar and set it in one corner by the door where it would be handy to get at, and father says, "Now we will be sure of that much of our sorghum." But he was wrong again, for in coming out after placing the barrel, the door was left open, and my baby sister found her way down there and turned the spigot handle, and before any of us knew it, all the sorghum in that part of the barrel above the

bung hole had run out on the cellar floor and under the pile of vegetables stored there. They had to be taken out and the molasses scrubbed off and laid in the sun to dry and the cellar had to be dug about two or three inches deeper to get rid of the molasses that had soaked into the dirt floor.

Now everything was ready, and we put the vegetables back in the cellar, but daddy didn't want to run any more chances of losing the rest of the sorghum, so he got a large demijohn that he used to haul water from the river for home use that he didn't use for that purpose any longer, as we had recently dug a well. He said, "We'll fill that and set it in the corner of the bedroom where it will be easy to watch." There was just enough to fill it, and it was set in the corner by father and mother's bed and father said, "It surely will be safe there, and we still have enough left for winter use." But, alas, daddy was wrong again, for one night not long after, there was an explosion like the firing of a gun or the bursting of a bomb. Of course everybody jumped out of bed, to land half way to their ankles in sorghum molasses. The demijohn was in thousand or more pieces, and molasses was all over everything in the house, even dripping from the ceiling. Our clothes, bedding, and hair was smeared and poor father's beard was matted with it. But father didn't say any cuss words, he simply said, "well, well, this surely is too bad." We didn't go back to bed that night, and we went to house cleaning, which lasted for several days before we got rid of the last of the molasses. Father said, "Well, I am glad that is all over, and that is the last of the molasses." But dear old dad was wrong again, for some of the horrible stuff had gone through the cracks in the floor, and soon began to mould and smell, so we had to move things out of the room, take the floor up, dig the dirt out that the molasses had soaked into, scrub all the boards, and replace them before the molasses deal was finally finished.

Mother decided if we did not eat the eggs on account of the rotten onion flavor, we would have to eat the hens, so she cooked a nice fat one and made corn dumplings with it, but nobody could stomach the rotten onion taste that it had. So there was the milk, butter, eggs, and chicken dinners "gone with the wind." Father said we'll have to have something beside vegetables to eat, so he decided to butcher the cow. She had gone dry anyway (probably because of eating so many onions) and was nice and fat and would make prime beef and enough to last all winter.

We children all shed a few tears when Old Broch was killed, for she was a family pet, but we had to have something to eat. That was the day before Thanksgiving, and the next day, mother planned a real Thanksgiving feast--a large roast of meat with potatoes and carrots laid around it. But there was a peculiar odor that filled the house while it was cooking. Mother said she might have spilled something on the stove.

The table was set and the roast brought in and how delicious it looked, and father, after giving thanks for the prosperous year and the many blessings that we had enjoyed, carved the roast, placing a liberal helping of meat, carrots, and spuds on each plate. Mother took a bite and looked at father; he took a taste and looked at us kids. I took a mouthful, and, horror of horrors, there was that familiar taste of rotten onions. So our dinner was entirely spoiled and all we had to eat was johnny cake straight with nothing to put on it or go with it. Still, father did not say any cuss words, and though sorely tried, was still able to say, "well, well, that surely is too bad."

Well, we took the remains of Old Broch and buried them out in the field, and my little sisters laid flowers on her grave. Father decided then and there to quit farming, and although all this happened over sixty years ago, to this day, I just can't say that I'm very crazy about sorghum or

onions.

Editor's note: Publication of these FOLKLORE PAMPHLETS was temporarily suspended in November, 1937, with Number 12, the suspension caused by pressure of work of completing "Nebraska: A Guide to the Cornhusker State," which volume is now in process of publication. The folklore series is resumed with this issue of tall tales. Number 14, PLACE NAME STORIES, will be issued in August.