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## Where Did They Go?

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# Where Did They Go?

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— by Dick Chapman

In the fall of 1898 when we arrived in the old Cheyenne-Arapaho country, after a four-hundred mile drive of twenty-two days, it was too late and the weather too cool for the short but vicious prairie rattler to be out, but it was not uncommon to see one or more buzzards circulating high in the air, covering many square miles of territory before gliding down to earth, perhaps behind a ridge or hill leaving the watcher to wonder whose dead critter it had located over there.

The big black squalid bird was never numerous as blackbirds or the pestiferous sparrows or even the well-known quail or prairie chicken, but it was not an unfamiliar sight to see by any means. Nor was it uncommon when riding over the prairie or driving along a wagon road to see two or more buzzards feeding on the carcass of a cow or calf which had died from an injury or possibly a screwworm infestation that had been neglected by the owner or cowhand, and sometimes a coyote would be there feeding on the opposite side or end from the buzzard. The buzzard did not look good or smell good, and the only time it was graceful was when it was riding the air-waves a mile high in the sky. I don't remember ever seeing a dead buzzard, and I never knew of one being shot; but at close range with their hooked beak, telescopic eyes, and droopy rusty black wings, they were the very symbol of death. I suppose they accomplished the job they were intended to do and then moved, but where did they go?

The prairie rattler at that time was quite common in the western part of the territory; but unlike the ugly buzzard, it was quite a good clean-looking chap--never very large, seldom measuring more than two feet in length. But what it lacked in size, it made up in viciousness. That fact was well known,

so people in rattler country were careful where they stepped when they were out in the grass. The rattler was not a noisy reptile, and when an intruder came close enough to cause the snake to sound off, the intruder was just too close for his own good; but relatively few people were struck by a rattlesnake anyway. Probably most settlers were more concerned about the danger of the scorpion than the rattlesnake, as the scorpion liked to stay in a warm dugout or sod house; and while its sting isn't deadly, the pain of the sting is terrible while it lasts. I should know because I have been stung by a scorpion twice. The first one was eighty years ago, and there's still a small red spot to mark the place. Many people have told how much more numerous rattlers were in prairie dog towns, but I never saw any greater numbers there than anywhere else.

I remember one time when I rode out to a small bunch of cattle to see about a two-year-old heifer that might have screwworms in a brand on her hip. I roped the heifer and she threw herself rather hard as she hit the end of the rope, and she lay still. I started up the rope to her with a piggin string in hand; but since she was making no effort to get up, I had a chance to inspect the brand without tying her down. As I neared the critter, I saw a rattlesnake lying near her with its head high and its tail quivering, ready for business. I circled around the heifer and took a quick look at the brand from the backside. It was scabbed over good, so I flipped the lariat from around her horns to let her up, then looked to see what about the rattler; but it had decided to run instead of fight and was streaking off through the bunch grass. No doubt the rattlesnakes had little love for the settler and his sod plow. Perhaps that's why they left, but where did they go?