

Dog-Town Diggings

by Enos A. Mills

About thirty years ago a cowboy took me out to see “The big Dog-town.” This metropolis was in the heart of the great plains near the Kansas-Colorado line. For five hours we rode westward along the southern limits of the town. It extended on over the horizon more than two miles wide and about forty miles long. A town with a population of two million!

Its visible inhabitants would have astounded a census-taker or a dog-catcher. Thousands of prairie dogs were yipping and barking more than sixty times a minute, and stub tails were whizzing away at the same time. We rode out among the crowded and protesting dogs and stopped to watch them. A number ducked into their holes.

Around each hole was an earthy collar less than two feet across and four or five inches high. At a distance this earthy collar surrounding the hole had the appearance of a low mound. Evidently this mound is to keep out storm water.

There were thousands of these holes, each with its dog. One near-by dog sat up on his mound like a ten-pound sea lion. He watched us with concentrated attention. His tongue and tail were still. When my hat started toward him he simply dropped into the hole. There were scattered holes which had a rabbit or two little owls at its doorway. Throughout the town were little orchards of dwarfed sagebrush and a scattering of tall weeds. A showy bed of prickly pear cactus inside the town limits was not inhabited.

The prairie dog is a sun worshipper. He keeps aloof from localities where willows are an enemy-hiding screen and where trees cast a shadow. His populous cities are in arid lands where for three hundred days each year they have their place in the sun.

The dogs seemed to be ever moving about, visiting or barking. A young dog near me ambled over to visit another. These two called on a third and while in session were joined by one's, two's, and companies until there were several dozen massed.

A young dog left his hole-top after a survey and started off for a call. But he turned aside to join and mingle with the crowd for a minute or two, then went on with his call. All this time there were several dogs behind me energetically protesting at or about something. Cheerfulness and vivacity characterized this fat, numerous people, but they were always alert, and commonly maintained sentinels scattered throughout the town.

While numbers were visiting or playing a few were feeding. They appeared to feed at all times of the day. But I do not believe that they eat half the food of the average woodchuck. The short grass was the principal food. They also ate of the various weeds around. I do not recall seeing them eat the bark of sagebrush or any part of the prickly pear.

Prairie dogs must materially assist in soil formation. Their digging and tunnelling lets dissolving water and disintegrating air into the earth and deepens the prairie soil.

The congesting population in time increases the soil supply. In places and for a time this new

soil seems to be helpful in increasing the food supply, but after a time in many towns food becomes scarce. Food scarcity causes movement. I have heard that the entire population of a dog town, like an entire species of migrating birds, will leave the old town and trek across the plains to a site of their liking.

A generation ago the prairie dog population must have exceeded two hundred millions. It was scattered over the great plains and the rocky region from the Canadian line to Mexico.

Dog towns are dry towns. My cowboy friend had repeated to me what everyone thus far had told him:

Prairie dogs dig down to water.

Prairie dogs, snakes, and owls all use the same den.

The water supply of dog towns and also their congested life so interested me that I visited a number of them to study the manners and customs of these citizens.

For two months not a drop of rain had fallen in Cactus Center. Not a bath nor a drink had the dogs enjoyed. I hurried into the town immediately after a rain thinking the dogs might be on a spree. I had supposed they would be drinking deeply again and swimming in the pools. But there was no interest. I did not even see one have a drink, although all may have had one. A few dogs were repairing the levee-crater rim of their holes, but beyond this things went on as usual. The rain did not cause dog town to celebrate.

On a visit to the "Biggest dog town in the world," near the Staked Plains in Texas, and where there were dogs numbering many millions, I watched well drillers at a number of places. Several of these wells, in the limits of dog town, struck water at three hundred feet, none less than this depth. This told that dogs did not dig down to water. They are busy diggers and have five claws on each foot but they do not dig through geological ages to obtain water.

One day two cowboys came along with a shovel which was to be used in setting up a circular corral and I excited their interest in prairie dog dens. We made the dirt lively for two hours but we did not reach bottom. I examined old and new gullies by dog towns but learned nothing. Finally, a steam shovel revealed subterranean secrets.

This steam shovel was digging a deep railroad cut through a dog town. The dogs barked and protested, but railroads have the right of way. The holes descended straight and almost vertically into the earth to the depth of from ten to fourteen feet. From the bottom a tunnel extended horizontally for from ten to forty feet. There was a pocket or side passage in the vertical hole less than two feet below the top: and a number of pockets or niches along the tunnel with buried excrement in the farther end of the tunnel. The side niches were used for sleeping places and side tracks. There was a network of connecting tubes between the vertical holes and communicating tunnels between the deeper tunnels.

I found the underground works of the dogs similar in other railroad cuts. None of the holes reached water, in fact, they were extra dry in the bottom.

Prairie dogs in common with many species of plants and animals of the arid districts require and use but little water. Dogs do without water for weeks except such moisture as is obtained from plants

eaten. A part of each year the plants are about as dry as dog biscuit.

There were from a few dozen to a thousand dogs upon or in an acre; from a few holes to more than one hundred in an area the size of a baseball diamond.

Although the plains had numerous large and populous places there were leagues without a single dog. Apparently the dogs keep on the higher and the well-drained land.

One day I watched some fat, happy puppies amusing themselves. They played, but without much pep, while mothers remained near to guard and to admire.

Prairie dogs often play. But never, I think, alone like the grizzly. In groups and in hundreds they played the universal game of tag. They were fat and low-g geared and their running gallop made an amusing effort to get somewhere. There were several boxing exhibitions, or farces. Their fat bodies and extremely short legs and slow, awkward movement made their efforts more ludicrous even than those of fat men boxers. There was a kind of snake dance with entangled countermarching in which most dogs tried to be dignified while many acted as though in new company and did not know what was expected of them.

One of their plays consisted in a single dog mimicking a stranger or an enemy. A bunch of dogs acted as spectators while an old dog highly entertained them by impersonating a coyote, at least his exhibition reminded me very much of coyote. The old dog imitated the coyote's progress through dog town, with the usual turning, looking, smelling, and stopping. He looked into holes, rolled over, bayed at the heavens, and even tried the three-legged gallop. During most of his stunts the spectators were silent but toward the last he was applauded with violent cursings and denunciation—at least so it sounded. A number of other folks were imitated, but just who they were my natural history and the actor's presentation gave no clue. Apparently the skunk was imitated. The actor's interpretation was good. The congested audience watched him closely, with now and then a yip, but mostly in silence.

But sometimes there are less peaceful scenes in dog town. A dog town without a coyote would be like Hades without Mephistopheles.

The prairie dog likes to keep close to his hole, or to the hole of a neighbour into which he can duck and escape the surprise raids of the coyote.

The coyote stalks patiently, hiding until a dog comes close or is too far from his hole to outrun the coyote to it. Coyotes hunt in pairs or fours and often while one, two, or three of them are holding the attention of the dogs the other coyote makes a sudden dash. Sometimes they take sheer delight in stirring up things in congested corners of dog town.

As I stood watching them, screened by the cottonwood, two coyotes crossed the corner of dog town and set it all agog. While these coyotes made their way leisurely through dog town the dogs sat on their crater-like mounds and uttered rapid-fire protests, ready to drop into safety in case of a rush by the coyotes. Suddenly two old dogs wheeled and yapped at highest rattling speed. While the first pair of coyotes was attracting attention a second pair appeared. The old dogs violently denounced the second pair for this surprise. But the coyote is ever doing the unexpected.

On the outskirts of Cactus Center numerous pairs of coyotes had enlarged prairie dog holes for a den. Pairs of prairie owls occupied other deserted dog holes, rabbits possessed many, and two were

taken by skunk families.

The black-footed ferret is the terrible enemy of prairie dogs. This small, agile, powerful fellow boldly invades the dens and slays the dog, rabbit or other inmates. The dogs do not appear even to attempt to resist him. But apparently he does not often call.

The mixed population of dog towns is not at peace. Lizards, rabbits, dogs, owls, snakes congest in the same block, but the block is red in tooth and claw. In a few cases I noticed these warring species all used the same subway entrance, but below the surface they surely lived in separate apartments.

No, the rattlesnake, prairie dog, and owl do not lie down together, unless a flood or other calamity throws them together.

One time I was approaching a town limits where yelpings and yappings filled the sky like a wind. From the summit of the ridge treeless, houseless, fenceless plains extended in leagues of level distances to every horizon. Before me there must have been one hundred thousand dogs swarming like the inhabitants of a disturbed ant hill. Beside a lone and grizzled old cottonwood I explored localities of dog town through my glasses.

Cloud shadows were sliding in silence across the green plains in which the golden banner bloomed like broken yellow coral. A cottontail hopped slowly from his hole to a clump of Spanish bayonet; buzzing gnats and bees hummed by. Grasshoppers all jumping toward the town limits suggested that they were abandoning the congested town.

Suddenly there were two disturbances: Near me an old dog was set upon by a protesting, noisy mob of dogs, while off on my left an invading rattlesnake threw a locality into a frenzy of excitement.

Apparently dogs aim to bury alive all enemies and invaders. The frightened rattler was pursued by a screeching, noisy dog mob, and driven into a dog hole. While two or three dogs kept watch of this, other dogs were looking into or wildly watching other dog holes which the snake might reach through underground tunnels.

Out of one of these holes he glided and at him went the yapping, snapping dog mob. Down into another hole he ducked. Evidently the dogs realized that this hole was detached, and the dogs fell over each other with efforts to claw earth into it. Presently the hole was filled to the collar and the snake buried. On this filled hole the dogs danced with weird and uncanny glee.

The other dog mob evidently rough handled the outcast dog but I missed most of this in watching the snake mob. It, too, was a vehement, noisy mob. The wise old dog refused to go into a hole but was literally jammed in, with earth clawed in after him until the hole was filled, then another barbaric, triumphal war dance upon the buried one.

Rattlesnakes eat young dogs and sometimes boldly enter the dens for them during the mother's absence.

But what was the offense of the old dog which had been attacked by his fellows? Was it crime or misdemeanour? Had he been misunderstood, or was it a case of circumstantial evidence? In other dog towns I have seen the populace putting one of their number to death, and in this town, about two years later, I saw two dogs entombed by the same wild mob. In this case even the sentinels forgot the

coyote and joined the mob. Were the executed ones murderers, robbers, or had they denied some ancient and unworthy superstition and like reformers paid the penalty of being in advance of popular opinion?

One afternoon Cactus Center had a storm. Black clouds suddenly covered the sky and a storm swept the prairie. A barrage of large hailstones led, striking the prairie violently at an angle so sharp that stones bounded and rolled for long distances. One which struck me in the side felt like a thrown baseball. There was a thumping, deep roar while they dashed meteorically down.

Dog town watched the hail but was deserted before the first raindrop fell. The downpour lasted for several minutes with a plentiful accompaniment of crashing of lightning.

A deep sheet of water swept down from the prairie beyond the town limits to the west, where the rainfall was a cloudburst. The sheet of water overspread the town and temporarily filled hundreds of the inhabited dens.

Out came the sputtering, protesting dogs. Numbers, perhaps hundreds, were drowned. Across the soaked prairie I hurried, catching the effects and the movements. I pulled several gurgling dogs from their water-filled holes, each of them making nip-and-tuck efforts to climb out.

The following morning a pair of coyotes slipped up the invading gully trench into town. Occasionally these crafty fellows peeked over the bank. Then they crept farther in, and one peeped from a screen of sagebrush on the bank. Suddenly both dashed out and each killed two dogs. The entire village howled and yapped itself hoarse while the invaders feasted within the town limits. Leisurely the coyote at last moved on through the town turning aside to sniff at the drowned dogs.

One spring I called early in Cactus Center and found blackbirds, robins, and other northbound birds among the visitors. Among these was a flock of golden plover, one of the greatest of bird travellers. These birds were resting and feeding. They probably were on their way from the far South American plains, to their nesting ground on the treeless grassland around the Arctic Circle.

During an early summer visit to this dog town it was decorated with wild flowers—sand lilies, golden banner, creamy vetch, and prickly poppy. I wandered about in the evening twilight looking at the evening star flowers while a coyote chorus sounded strangely over the wide, listening prairie. Near me was a dog hole; its owner climbed up to peep out; in a minute or so he retired without a bark or a yap.

The magnificent visible distances of the plains seem to create a desire in its dwellers to see everything that is going on around. And also a desire for sociability, for herds. Buffalo crowded in enormous herds, the antelope were sometimes in flocks of thousands, and the little yellow-brown dogs crowded and congested.

The old cottonwood tree which stood on one edge of Cactus Center dog-town limits was the observed of all observers. Through the years it must have seen ten thousand tragedies, comedies, courtships, plays, and games of these happy little people of the plains.

No dog hole was within fifty feet of the old cottonwood tree. The tree probably offered the wily coyote concealment behind which he sometimes approached to raid; and from its top hawks often dived for young dogs, for mice, and also for grasshoppers. I suppose owls often used it for a philosophizing

stand, and also for a point of vantage from which to hoot derision on the low-down, numerous populace.

But the old tree was not wholly allied with evil, and was a nesting site for orioles, wrens, and bluebirds. From its summit through the summer days the meadow lark with breast of black and gold would send his silvery notes sweetly ringing across the wide, wide prairie.

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