

HUNTING A CROCODILE IN NEBRASKA.

(Translated from an article written in Bohemian by Mr. Joseph P. Sedivý, Verdigre, Nebraska, for the Bohemian weekly Osveta Americka, Tusha, in 1910).

In the fall of 1873 a small company of Bohemian settlers, living on homesteads in Knox County, Nebraska, were on their regular trip to Neligh on the Elkhorn River, in which place was a mill, the nearest to their own settlement, Niobrara. They were hauling grain, to be ground into flour and bran. From Niobrara the way led ^{over a high} ~~through a high~~, dry prairie and during the whole trip there was not a place where one could water his team or find water for himself, ^{except one small stream}. The teams were oxen and the travelling slow in consequence, for the roads were rough. In consideration of these difficulties, it was the custom for several men to go together, so that they could mutually help each other, and besides that the trip was thus made less monotonous. The travelling was usually done by night, if the moon shone. Inasmuch as there was no fuel to be found on the way, a supply of same was taken along, for cooking purposes. The oxen were unhitched, watered and sent to graze, then a fire was made under a wagon, an iron kettle filled with water was hung by a chain to a shaft and coffee was made. One of the younger members of the party watched the oxen. The others settled themselves around the fire and smoked until the coffee was done, then each brought his lunch and all had a jolly time eating together.

After supper if the moon shone the animals were harnessed up again and the trip resumed. If it was dark, the oxen were gathered and tethered and traveling was resumed at dawn.

In the fall of 1873 several Bohemian settlers, neighbors, and I a boy of sixteen, started out on a similar expedition. Besides the necessities mentioned above we each carried a gun. The day was

pleasant and the journey smooth, so that by twilight we reached the stream and proceeded to go in camp. Neighbor F. W. had a pair of three-year old oxen, quite wild and hard to catch. Their owner, for ^{the sake of} convenience, tied long ropes to their horns, about half an inch thick. While we were eating it grew dark and clouds appeared in the northwest. I was asked to get the animals. I had not gone far when I saw a crooked oak branch lying in the grass. It was most probably left there by other travelers. The branch was broken ^{and jagged} at one end and had several small stumps, the remains of smaller branches.

I succeeded in getting the oxen, although the three-year-olds gave me the usual trouble, and as I knew I would again be sent for them as soon as I had warmed myself a little, I decided to tie the ~~wild~~ ^{wild} pair to the oak branch. Then I returned to camp, feeling that I would not have much trouble in getting the ~~wild pair~~ ^{them} when ~~were~~ to start again. On my return I said I had the animals near but did not think to mention the branch.

Just as I sat down, one of the neighbors was relating a story of a dragon, which, according to him, used to raise havoc in Bohemia. The others listened and voiced their various opinions about the probability of such creatures ever existing, and one spoke up and said there were dragons even here in America, but they have no wings and ^{are} ~~were~~ called crocodiles. He said that the teacher in Bohemia told the children about it, when he was speaking of America. The speaker had been in this country about a year.

The fire died down and the moon arose, presaging a clear night. A cold wind blew over the prairie, bathed in moonlight. We decided to proceed with our journey, for we thought we might get to Neligh by that time. Mr. F. W. went for his oxen, which had walked a ways to where

3.

they had better grazing. ^{He} ~~Mr. W. T.~~ still had his mind full of dragons and when he suddenly saw in the grass something that looked like a vast, open jaw, and the tall grass began to move, as though some crawling creature was in it, he was petrified. After moving about three or four feet the monster lowered its head into the rushes but immediately raised it again and seemed to have something in its mouth. It seemed too to be moving in the direction of the ox. "A crocodile! Help! Help!" he cried and ran for his life. We felt as if struck by lightning. When our neighbor reached us and we all showered him with questions, he could only stutter: "There - near - my - ox! There! It is terrible! Give me my axe and get your guns! But be careful!"

We each armed ourselves and carefully crept to the designated spot. A pup followed us, we had taken it along from home. Cautiously we listened. Something stirred in the grass, it seemed to be moving in it. Again we saw it raise its frightful, bald head.

"Good God above! Run!" cried one. Another valiantly took aim and shot the monster in the head. Evidently with effect, for the creature jerked and fled, beating the air first with its head and then its tail, and it seemed to follow the ox.

"Mercy on us! It will kill the ox! Shoot again!"

Shots were fired in rapid succession, the dog was beside himself, the neighbors called and made a great racket and as soon as they spied the crocodile again, a new bombardment began. The one who had an axe ran ahead and soon we heard his joyful cry: "Here! Here! I have finished it!"

4.

When we reached the spot we found him heroically chopping the crocodile, the blows seemed to echo as they struck the creature's armor.

But it did not move and apparently was dead. We had killed a dangerous beast that had threatened the lives of our ^{oxen} ~~exter~~ and our own. Now it lay in the ~~glass~~ harmless. Breathless I ran to it and as I looked at it I suddenly thought of the oak branch and began to laugh loudly. The neighbors thought I had lost my senses, but presently I explained to them. Some of the unbelieving Thomases struck lights, and when they saw that my surmise was right, I was rewarded by a good box on the ears.

We all breathed easier, but on the other hand had an awful time to get the oxen together, for our shooting had sent them running far and wide. The ox which had been tied to the branch had either broken the rope, or the rope had been shot away.

We decided to keep this episode to ourselves, for we knew what to expect if we did not, and so the crocodile hunt by the first ^{Bohemian} ~~settlers~~ settlers in Knox County, Nebraska, remained a secret for a long time.