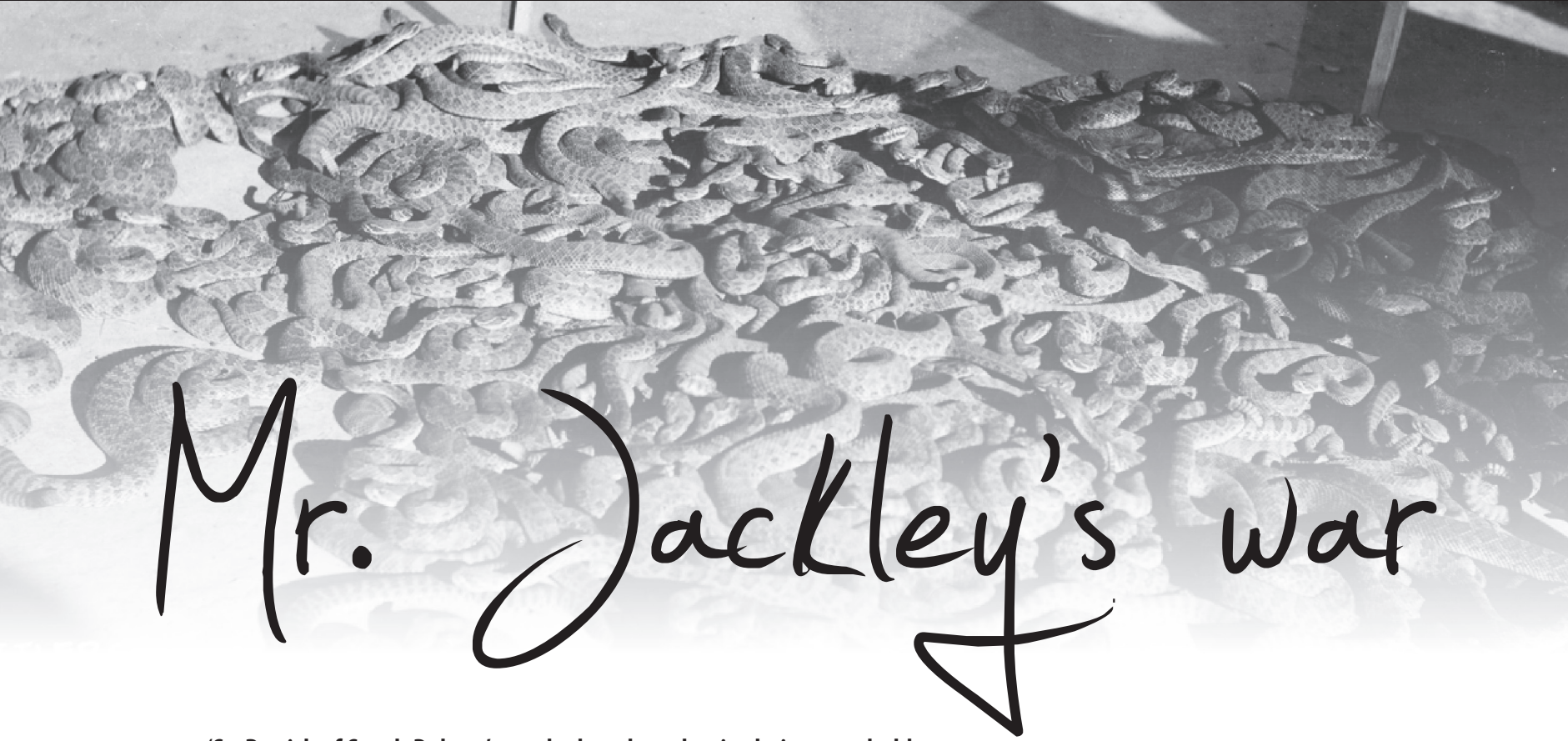


# Dakota Life

HARVEST FOR HUNGER

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‘St. Patrick of South Dakota’ attacked rattlesnakes in their strongholds

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H.K. Gloyd is not the first out-of-state hunter to fall in love with South Dakota after a good guide shows him the hunt of his life one October; but his quarry isn’t the pheasant.

“We reached Pierre by auto the night of October 1,” Gloyd writes in a 1946 article recounting his hunt. “Next morning was bright and warm. We set out with Jackley in his pickup truck, its rugged motor taking us over good roads, bad roads, and no roads at all, to a den-site some fifty miles north where a trap was set on a hill overlooking the Missouri River. Prairie grass carpeted the hills with silky hues of yellow, purple and pale red. The sturdy ash and stately cottonwoods along the streams were splendid in bright gold ...

“Our next stop was a prairie dog town some 50 or 60 miles farther north which we reached in the early afternoon. Jackley knew of it only by hearsay but located it promptly and the fun began ... The snakes were lying singly or in groups up to twelve or fourteen in and around the entrances to burrows abandoned by the prairie dogs.”

It’s exactly what H.K. Gloyd has come to South Dakota for – the prairie rattlesnake. The hunt then moves on to another site 20 miles southwest:

“Preceding us by a rod or so, Jackley tossed the snakes out of the entrances of the burrows and down the hill. They rolled out in globs, blobs and basketfuls and immediately came back up the steep slope, rattling ominously and striking at the slightest provocation, in an effort to regain the shelter of the holes. Wright and I were very busy for a while, catching and sacking as effectively as we could and kicking the others down hill away from the den. Old stuff to Jackley: he stood on the rim, grinning and tactfully offering little comment.”

Gloyd recounts his adventures along the Moreau River, Pretty Creek Butte and Thunder Butte afterward in an article in *The Chicago Naturalist* titled, “Some Rattlesnake Dens of South Dakota.” He and Jackley also make a short film about the hunt. Gloyd gives the impression that he hasn’t come merely to see the rattlesnakes, but to visit with A.M. Jackley, his correspondent for 15 years on the topic of reptiles.

Albert M. Jackley – no relation to South Dakota’s current attorney general, Marty Jackley – was already by that time quite famous in South Dakota for his way with snakes.

“Mr. Jackley is in charge of the rattlesnake control program of the South Dakota Department of Agriculture,” Gloyd writes. “He has observed the distribution and habits of rattlesnakes in that state for many years and is eminently qualified for his present work. In some parts of western South Dakota rattlesnakes are sufficiently numerous to be considered a serious menace to livestock (especially sheep), to ground-nesting birds and to human life. When Jackley’s success in locating dens and destroying snakes, at first on his own time and as a favor to ranchers, attracted considerable notice several years ago, he was persuaded to undertake the work on a larger scale under the auspices of the state. He has developed an efficient trap for catching snakes emerging from dens and has undertaken the task of training others in his methods of eradication. People throughout the state are interested. Maintenance men on the highways report ‘snake crossings’ to Jackley’s office in Pierre and the local radio station broadcasts instructions. The object of the campaign is to reduce the numbers of rattlesnakes where they are especially numerous so that danger from their venomous bites will be minimized. An attempt to exterminate them completely is not desirable and probably would be impossible.”

## Mr. Jackley’s war

Despite what Gloyd believes, A.M. Jackley’s own report to the governor in 1946-47 suggests that extermination might indeed be desirable and possible, at least in locations; and he is eager to employ lethal new tools such as poisonous gas. A.M. Jackley’s language suggests that South Dakota is at war with reptiles:

“The people living in the west river territory now recognize there has been a very noticeable decrease in the rattlesnake population in areas where they have been vigorously attacked at their dens. Colonies that hibernate in prairie dog towns are being rapidly exterminated. The dens in washouts, cracked bluffs and stony buttes are the rattlesnakes’ last line of defense. This campaign has reached the point where by a concentrated attack on these dens control will be attained.”

Because Jackley has trapped snakes at their den sites, he has data suggesting that for every 100 rattlesnakes in a den there will be about 40 nonpoisonous snakes – roughly 10 bull snakes and 30 blue racers, though other non-poisonous snakes such as garter snakes and two kinds of king snake might also be present. But he suggests the benefit in getting rid of so many rattlers justifies the use of such means as poisonous gas to kill the snakes.

He discusses what he has in mind in several of his annual reports, including one from 1945-46:

“A number of gases and combinations have been tested and we now know that large numbers of these snakes can be killed by applying gas to dens. Further, that this can be done at a remarkably low cost. For example: I used \$1.75 worth of chlorine gas to kill between two and three hundred rattlers. Another place I tried formaldehyde and killed about 300 at a cost of \$1.00. Methyl bromide and carbon bisulphide has been used effectively at very low cost.”

Poisonous gas to dispatch large populations of rattlers never past the experimental stage in South Dakota, apparently. Yet even without it, Jackley calculates that he personally killed fully 4,500 rattlesnakes during the fall of 1942 alone. And the volunteers encouraged by, and in some cases, trained by A.M. Jackley accounted for even more.

“Many large kills were made without my assistance. One outstanding case was in central Meade County where 740 were killed in two prairie dog towns while in a few other similar places in the same county, from two to five hundred were disposed of. It would serve no good purpose for me to make a wild guess at the total number slain in 1942 because it was so general, but I wish to refer to it as a banner year,” Jackley writes.

Already from his 1940-1941 report, Jackley – who has located 600 dens by then – has been emphasizing the need to get volunteers to help him find and attack rattler dens, adding that, “The one in charge of this campaign has little or no time to locate snakes in fall or spring for that is the time for the slaughter.”

## A legend

After A.M. Jackley dies in Hot Springs on Feb. 20, 1950, while returning from vacation, the next report of the South Dakota Department of Agriculture eulogizes him:

“Today, countless numbers of grateful farmers from the Missouri river to the Black Hills are offering testimonials to the efficiency and success of the campaign carried on so unremittingly by Mr. Jackley. His crusade has proved to be the rattler’s nemesis by driving much of its habitat into the more inaccessible regions isolated from the ranching and farming areas where the reptile had carried on its reign of terror to both human beings and livestock since the state was first settled.



At top: A.M. Jackley killed these rattlesnakes in a single day. At center: A.M. Jackley is shown at a rattlesnake den site. (Courtesy of the South Dakota State Historical Society)