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(1)

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The Life of Rattlesnake Town and its Lesson.

The land of Tiadaghton, Pa., once the property of the Six Nations, but since the year 1784 owned and controlled by the State of Pennsylvania, and now known as the Pine Creek Region, was for many years after its acquisition by Pennsylvania the center of a thriving industry and commercial prosperity. It was fishing for rattlesnakes, extracting the oil from their slimy carcasses, and marketing the same. The Pine Creek region was the very hotbed of rattlesnakes, and the locality produced them by the million.

The mountains which lift their heads a thousand feet or more above Tiadaghton or Pine Creek, were peculiarly adapted to the cultivation and propagation of these reptiles. The business of lumbering was also carried on at the same time, and the timber and lumber rafts which at every freshet were borne upon the waters of the Tiadaghton to the west branch of the Susquehanna, and thence to the Chesapeake Bay, were generally loaded with huge cans or barrels of rattlesnake oil, extracted by the native Pine Creekers, in their rude but economical way, by lassooing, skinning, and hanging the reptiles up by their tails upon poles in long rows in the sun, with wooden troughs underneath to catch and receive the oleaginous substances. Every snake farmer had his hotbed or den, to which he would repair yearly in June, July and August and harvest the crop.

The product of this harvest (rattlesnake oil), was either sold for cash to the lumbermen or shipped on commission, or bartered for whisky. There were rattlesnake kings, autocrats, and monopolists in the snake-farming business then, as there are now in the petroleum, railroad, and mining industry. Complaints were then made in relation to discrimination in freights and corners in rattlesnake oil, as there are now in petroleum, corn, wheat, oats, pork, butter, lard, cheese, and oleomargarine.

Rattlesnake Tom, or Snakey Tom, a wily and scheming old monopolist, bondholder, and rattlesnake stock jobber, early in the development of the industry secured valuable franchises, which ultimately made him the Jay Gould or Standard Oil Company of that region, and for years he monopolized the catching of the snakes, extraction of the oil, and the marketing of the same. He was usually dressed in rattlesnake skins from head to foot while skulking about in search of some fearless poacher who had invaded his premises or trespassed upon his snakedom. To see him gliding along stealthily and sinuously over the rocks and mountain sides a thousand feet above the waters of the Tiadaghton, wearing moccasins made of the skins of the yellow and black rattlesnakes, his breeches, vest, coat, and chapeau of the same material, each garment festooned and trimmed with rattles taken from the snakes, with a sash of snake skins encircling his waist and over his shoulders, after the manner of a modern brigadier, and carrying a strong oaken rod in his hand, to which was attached a linen lasso, he certainly made the impression upon the natives that he was a monarch in his profession and a terror to all evildoers in the rattlesnake farming business. His ranch, or shipping yard, was about a mile below where Marsh Creek empties its waters into the Tiadaghton, while his plantations or snakeries were on the east and west sides of the stream, and covered an area of several thousand acres, the best adapted to the natural and artificial propagation of rattlesnakes of any territory in northern Pennsylvania.

Originally this large tract was owned by some fifteen or twenty snake farmers, who became involved in contracting for more oil than they could deliver, and were cut short. Tom discounted their paper and advanced them whisky. Not wishing to do without that necessary article in their busines, they pledged their snakeries to Tom for an advance. When they least expected it Tom entered up a Pennsylvania tight note against them and closed their concerns. There were no preferred creditors in those days, nor receivers appointed, so Tom had absolute control of their effects and wrested their snakeries from them. They were, however, wedded to their business, and could not, or would not, pursue any other vocation, and became the tenants of Tom, working the snakeries on shares. To prevent these tenants from diverting the products from their legitimate channel and selling to a rival monopolist whose plantation was located some eighteen or twenty miles below upon the Tiadaghton, was the reason that such an unwearied vigilance was required by Rattlesnake Tom.

In June the business was most brisk. Then the snakes came forth of their own accord in the greatest numbers, and were lassoed by the snakers. What snakes were not attracted by the genial rays of the sun from their dens were shaken from their rocky beds by the thousand by the violent claps of thunder which occurred in this month. The tendency then was toward over-production, and made the month of June a busy season at the snakeries. During this month Rattlesnake Tom never undressed himself, and scarcely slept an hour out of the twenty-four, having his headquarters in the saddle. More definitely speaking, he tried to diffuse himself over his valuable snakedom and be at every point where business was most brisk at one and the same time, keeping his vigilant eye upon his crafty and dishonest tenantry. In July the work would get down to a reasonable working basis, but during the latter part of dog days, when the snakes were blind, business would revive again, and sometimes keep active until the middle of September.

Rattlesnake Tom owned a line of boats which plied between his shipping dock and Northumberland, touching at Jersey Shore, Williamsport, Muncy, and intermediate points. These, of course, were craft suitable for the trade. When the business was brisk they were kept busy transporting whisky into the camps those employed at the snakeries, and in taking rattlesnake oil down Williamsport or some other seaport, and banking the proceeds. Tom's credit was A No. 1, and he was rated high in business agencies, his drafts always being honored by the liquor dealers down the river. He would occasionally suffer from dishonest sea captains, who would forge his paper, having learned in a clandestine manner how many snake rattles Tom usually sent instead of greenbacks to represent an order for a barrel of whisky. When such a dishonesty was discovered, the whole of Tom's tenantry would suffer. An embargo for the space of twenty-four hours was issued by Tom, and no snaker could get a drop of whisky for that space of time. This was indeed severe and capital punishment.

Tom was honest with the liquor dealers, and settled punctually every year when the rattlesnake season had closed and the books were posted. Although not skilled in the art of reading and writing and the manner of keeping books, no man could tell any better than he, learned or unlearned, how many snakes it required to make a cord or how much oil could be extracted from them. By long experience he was enabled to cast his eye over a miscellaneous squirming mass of fire or ten thousand snakes and estimate the number with mathematical precision, or he could detect any attempt on the part of his tenantry to withhold the true Simon pure snake oil and substitute for it the baser oils, such as raccoon, skunk, bear or woodchuck oil. His goods were always straight and unadulterated, monopolist oil prince though he was. The building of the Jersey Shore and Pine Creek Railroad by Magee, Sherwood, Wallace, and Vanderbilt destroyed Tom's shipping and wrecked his business just at a time when rattlesnake oil is worth from a dollar to a dollar and fifty cents per ounce. Alas! such is the fate of some of our most profitable old-time industries; such is the fate of individuals, States and nations.

Rattlesnake Tom is no more. The march of civilization and the invasion of his territory by the locomotive, the freight, passenger, and parlor car wounded his native pride. Forlorn and disheartened, he sought his beloved mountains, and died of either hanger, chagrin or mortification.—[N. Y. Sun.

Insect Pain.—Shakespeare betrayed an ignorance of insect anatomy when he wrote, "The poor beetle that we tread upon, in corporeal sufferance feels a pang as great as when a giant dies." Minute dissections have proven that insects, though possessed of nerves, have no well-defined organs representing the brain, the seat of concentrated feeling, where all the nervous connections meet. They have, instead, a chain of ganglia or bundles of nerve-substance, from each of which nerves branch out to contiguous parts: so that the sensations are not all carried to one grand focus of acute sensibility as with us, but form in fact separate systems, any one of which might be destroyed without disturbing the sensations of the others. Sleeping moths may be pinned to trees without feeling pain enough to awaken them; and it is related that a dragon-fly whose long abdomen an entomologist had accidentally severed from the rest of the body, suffered so little inconvenience or loss of appetite that it at once greedily devoured two small flies.

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