

H A R L A . D A L S T R O M

## **“Snake hunting has been shamefully neglected”**

### **A. M. Jackley and Rattlesnake Abatement in South Dakota**

One day in July 1943, Joe Silbernagel, who managed the general store in Trail City, South Dakota, southwest of Mobridge, was surprised by something on a top shelf that was not part of the store's inventory. As he and two patrons looked up at the boxes of breakfast cereals, they noticed a head peering out from around a container of corn flakes. The head was that of a rattlesnake, and after clearing the shelf, Silbernagel killed the serpent.<sup>1</sup>

This bizarre episode symbolized a facet of life in an area that less than two generations earlier had been one of North America's last frontiers. As did earlier Great Plains pioneers, settlers in western South Dakota in the early twentieth century faced environmental challenges, such as weather extremes, scarcity of water, prairie fires, and distance. Another worry was the prairie rattlesnake. In South Dakota, the area from the Missouri River westward, with its prairie-dog towns and crevice-laden

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1. *West River Progress* (Dupree, S.Dak.), 29 July 1943. The newspaper identified the Trail City grocer as “Joe Sibernagel,” but a grocer named John J. Silbernagel appears in the 1940 census. See Manuscript Population Schedule, Jackson Twp., Dewey Co., S.Dak., in U.S., Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Sixteenth Census of the United States, 1940*, National Archives Microfilm Publication T627, roll 3854, sheet 1A.

buttes, was especially congenial to this species of pit viper.<sup>2</sup> One need not look long in pioneer reminiscences to discover that newcomers soon learned to take these venomous creatures seriously. Reflecting upon their early days of farming in Tripp County around 1908, William T. Gardner and his wife observed, “We were in constant fear of prairie fires and rattlesnakes. No one ever left the place without a stick to kill the snakes.”<sup>3</sup>

The passing of the settlement era did not bring an end to the rattlesnake danger. Cases of snakebite, if not common, were frequent enough to be a safety concern for residents of the western half of the state for two major reasons. First, the West River country was sparsely settled, and travel time to suitable medical care could be considerable. Second, small children were especially vulnerable to rattlesnake bites. In mid-summer 1927, eighteen-month-old Norma Jeanne Robinson died in a Murdo hospital from rattlesnake bites incurred while playing outside her home south of Van Metre.<sup>4</sup> For the Elmer and Rena Behrend family, farming in the remote Hereford area in Meade County in 1933, this threat became reality. In Rena Behrend’s words, “[On] May 31, our darling Ethel was bit by a rattle snake and died in a little over six hours. She was three years old, blue eyed, with curly blond hair, chubby, rosy cheeks, sunny disposition, and every body’s darling. That year the grass hoppers took the crop.”<sup>5</sup> In September 1934, three-year-old Cameron Taylor died after being bitten by a rattlesnake while playing in a neighbor’s yard in Trail City. As Charles Maupin, age three, played

2. Pit vipers possess a sensory organ capable of detecting differences in temperature among objects in their immediate vicinity, which aids in locating prey. The term “pit viper” refers to the location of this organ in facial pits. The scientific name for the prairie rattlesnake native to South Dakota is *Crotalus viridis viridis*. Laurence M. Klauber, *Rattlesnakes: Their Habits, Life Histories, and Influence on Mankind*, 2 vols. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, published for the Zoological Society of San Diego, 1956), 1:11–12, 55, 369–71.

3. *History of Tripp County* (Winner, S.Dak.: Winner Chamber of Commerce, Diamond Jubilee History Committee, 1984), p. F-70.

4. *Winner Advocate*, 11 Aug. 1927.

5. *Through the Years—before 1966* (N.p.: Lakeside Old Settlers Association, 1966), p. 497.

outside his family's Cheyenne Agency residence in September 1942, a rattlesnake inflicted two bites upon him that proved to be fatal.<sup>6</sup> In the 1940s, reports of rattlesnakes in towns such as Dupree, Isabel, and Mobridge were not exceptional. "There is no doubt a rattlesnake den somewhere near Dupree as there are snakes in town every summer," one report noted.<sup>7</sup> Before the environmental-awareness movement of the late twentieth century, it is hardly surprising that many South Dakotans saw rattlesnakes as a menace to be eliminated.

If safety concerns led South Dakotans to kill rattlers when they encountered them, actively hunting the snakes could be something of a sport. According to the Gardner account of life in early twentieth-century Tripp County, "Killing rattlers turned out to be quite a hobby. I saved the rattles and at one time had a quart can full."<sup>8</sup> Another Tripp County recollection indicated that the snakes could be put to good use. "Some of the rattlers from this section were caught and sold . . . for \$5.00," the writer noted. "This money bought the first song books for the Lakeview Sod Church."<sup>9</sup> In the Gregory County hamlet of Dixon, barber and pool-hall operator August Robson earned the nickname "Rattlesnake Pete" thanks to "his hobby of processing rattlesnake skins."<sup>10</sup>

6. *Pierre Daily Dakotan*, 24 Sept. 1934; *West River Progress*, 17 Sept. 1942. The 1940 census gives Charles's surname as "Maupin" and his age as one, in contrast to the newspaper's "Maupan," age two. Manuscript Population Schedule, Cheyenne Agency, Dewey Co., S.Dak., in *Sixteenth Census*, roll 3854, sheet 5B. The instances mentioned here are given as examples and do not constitute a comprehensive listing of such tragedies. For examples of nonfatal bites to youngsters, see *West River Progress*, 15 Aug. 1940, 5 June 1941, 6 June, 22 Aug. 1946, 29 May, 9 Oct. 1947, 14 July 1949; *Buffalo Times Herald*, 1 Oct. 1942.

7. *West River Progress*, 9 Aug. 1945. See also *ibid.*, 8 Aug., 12 Sept. 1940, 3 July 1941, 3 Sept. 1942, 18 July 1946. For evidence of the rattlesnake problem in the published literature on South Dakota's West River area, see Philip L. Gerber, ed., *Bachelor Bess: The Homesteading Letters of Elizabeth Corey, 1909–1919* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1991).

8. *History of Tripp County*, p. F-70.

9. *Ibid.*, pp. F-5, F-6.

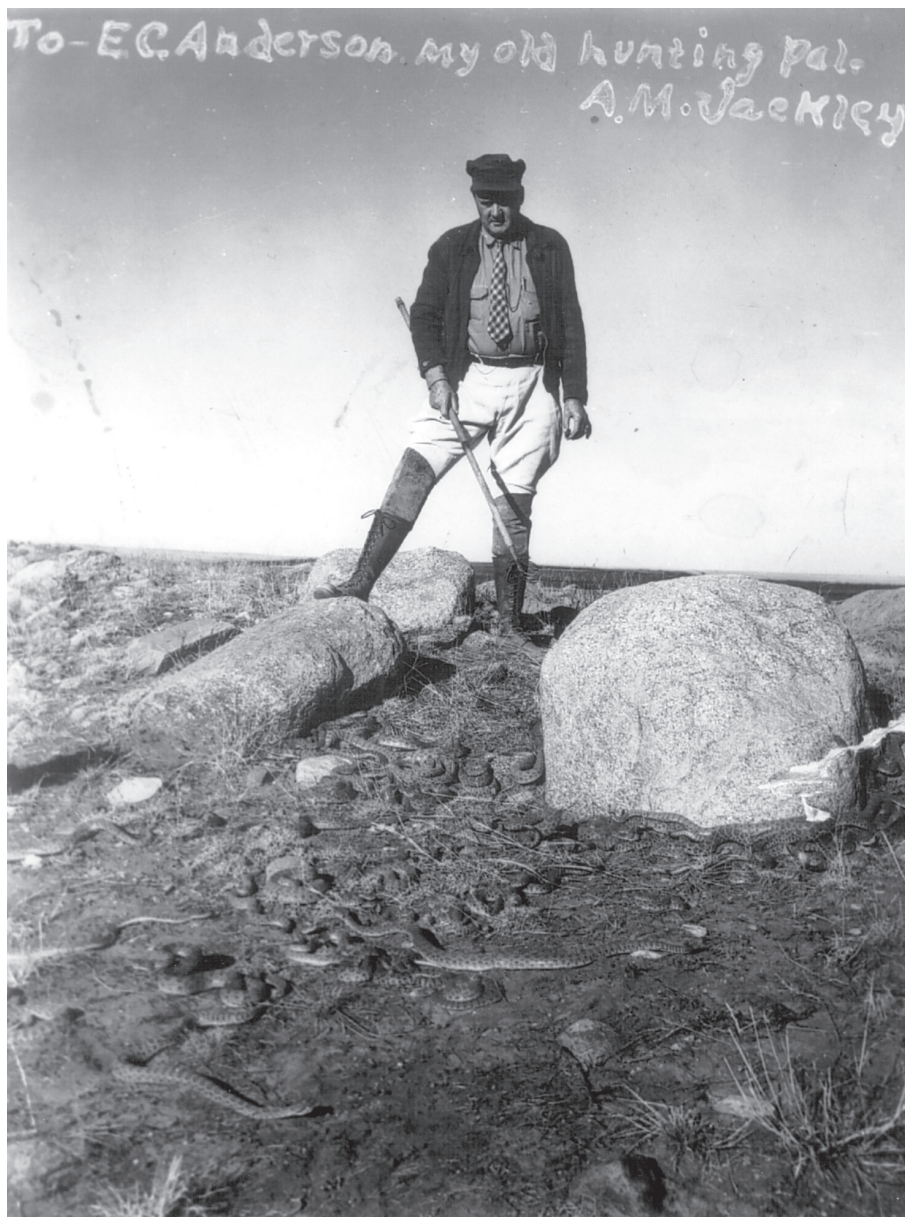
10. *History of Dixon, South Dakota* (Gregory, S.Dak.: Gregory County Historical Society, 1974), p. 12.

By the mid-1930s, A. M. Jackley of Pierre had risen to prominence in South Dakota as a rattlesnake handler and an authority on the life of the prairie rattler. Although he kept rattlers at his home in Pierre, he advocated systematic elimination of the creatures. Born 2 February 1880 in Russell, Iowa, Albert Matthew Jackley was one of seven children in the farm family of John and Henrietta Nickerson Jackley. He spent his childhood in the Hawkeye State, but when he was twelve years old, his father died, and sometime thereafter his mother took the family to Franklin, Indiana, where Albert and his brothers attended school while holding night jobs in a glass factory. Returning to Iowa, Albert attended Des Moines College, supporting himself with various jobs, including work as an insurance company collection agent. Following his formal education, he read law and became an attorney. By 1905, A. M. Jackley—as he was known in public for the rest of his life—was a partner with C. A. Conger in the Jackley & Conger Land and Loan Company in Seymour, Iowa, a community in the coal-mining area of the south-central part of the state. Debt collection and the writing of insurance policies were among the services the partnership advertised. He eventually became the sole proprietor of the firm.<sup>11</sup>

In the meantime, Jackley's brother John, some seven years his senior, had gone to South Dakota, settling in 1902 in Pierre, where he went into the real-estate business. In the early years of the twentieth century, midwestern farmers were often attracted to recently opened land in the High Plains. Perhaps due to his brother's influence and his own background in real estate, A. M. Jackley became interested in marketing western property, leading tours to promising sites in South Dakota and as far distant as New Mexico Territory.<sup>12</sup>

11. Washington Twp., Lucas Co., Iowa, in U.S., Department of the Interior, Office of the Census, *Tenth Census of the United States, 1880*, National Archives Microfilm Publication T9, roll 352, p. 513A; *Polk's Iowa Gazetteer and Business Directory 1905–1906*, vol. 13 (Des Moines, Iowa: R. L. Polk & Co., 1905), pp. 1171, 1864; *Iowa State Gazetteer and Business Directory 1908–1909*, vol. 14 (Des Moines, Iowa: R. L. Polk & Co., 1908), pp. 1236, 1237, 1239 (advertisement), 1771, 1931; *R. L. Polk & Co.'s Iowa Gazetteer 1918–1919* (Des Moines, Iowa: R. L. Polk & Co., 1918), pp. 863, 1496; *Pierre Daily Capital Journal*, 24 Feb. 1950.

12. *Pierre Daily Capital Journal*, 2 June 1939, 24 Feb. 1950. Jackley's interest in western lands probably explains his presence in Pendleton, Oregon, in March 1905. *East Oregonian* (Pendleton, Oreg.), 20 Mar. 1905.



Wielding his snake-handling hook and wearing high-topped leather boots for protection, A. M. Jackley poses with rattlesnakes taken from a nearby den. Rocky terrain in western South Dakota provides ideal habitat for the snakes.

In 1905, Jackley, while apparently keeping a hand in his Seymour business, settled in Alamogordo, New Mexico Territory, where he engaged in the real-estate business, politics, and the practice of law.<sup>13</sup> By May 1909, his life in New Mexico was tumultuous. The *Albuquerque Citizen* described Jackley as “a partisan” in a case involving a company that dealt in irrigated land, adding that the contest was “causing almost endless litigation in . . . Alamogordo, Santa Fe and at Corydon, Iowa.” That Jackley was in the thick of the courtroom battle was evident when the judge at Alamogordo gave him a sixty-day contempt sentence. The *Citizen* noted that an attempt was made to get territorial governor George Curry “to investigate” Jackley’s plight.<sup>14</sup> Whatever Governor Curry’s response, by July, Jackley was free. At some point, he became a foe of Curry, and in October, he was again in the limelight, engaged in an internal squabble within the Republican party after asking United States Secretary of the Interior Richard Ballinger to remove Governor Curry from office, apparently on grounds that the governor had not taken action against public servants who had allegedly mishandled public funds. Although Jackley was still politically active in New Mexico in January 1910, by June of that year he was back in Seymour, where he was elected delegate to the Wayne County Republican organization.<sup>15</sup>

13. The details on A. M. Jackley’s life in New Mexico are minimal. See *Rapid City Daily Journal*, 1 Oct. 1937; *Santa Fe New Mexican*, 9 July 1907, 20 July 1959 (reprint, “50 Years Ago” column), 29 Jan. 1960 (reprint, “50 Years Ago” column).

14. *Albuquerque Citizen*, 15 May 1909. See also *ibid.*, 26 May 1909.

15. *Carlsbad (N.Mex.) Current*, 29 Oct. 1909 (reprinting story from *Denver Post*); *Marion (Ohio) Daily Mirror*, 25 Oct. 1909; *Santa Fe New Mexican*, 20 July 1959 (“50 Years Ago”), 29 Jan. 1960 (“50 Years Ago”); *Corydon (Iowa) Times-Republican*, 10 June 1910. Corydon was the seat of Wayne County, where Seymour, Jackley’s hometown, was located. A New Mexico resident, R. G. Mullins [Mullen] was indicted in district court in Corydon for obtaining five thousand dollars for a New Mexico irrigation project through misrepresentation. He was later convicted. *Corydon Times-Republican*, 9 Apr., 21 May, 9 Nov. 1909. A search of this newspaper for 1909–1910 did not show Jackley as a party in any litigation. Curry, who had a poor relationship with Ballinger, resigned as territorial governor effective at the end of February 1910, although his autobiography makes no mention of Jackley. The Curry-Ballinger clash probably contributed to the rift between President William Howard Taft and former President Theodore Roosevelt that led to the split in the Republican Party and the election of Democrat Woodrow Wilson in



Probably because of his real-estate work, he resided briefly in Wessington Springs, South Dakota, and during this sojourn he met Rosa Marshall, who had graduated from William Penn College in Oskaloosa, Iowa. They were married in Wessington Springs in June 1911 and settled in Seymour.<sup>16</sup>

The Seymour to which Jackley returned with Rosa had grown substantially in the previous decade. In 1912, the year the Jackleys' only child, Albert, Jr., was born, Seymour had some 2,290 residents and was touted as a "stirring incorporated town" with "2 large coal mines . . . employing over 300 men."<sup>17</sup> In addition to his partnership with Conger, Jackley for a time served as city attorney, carried on a private law practice, and was a notary public. His business often took him to other communities.<sup>18</sup> Indicative of his outgoing personality and business activity, he was active in civic affairs, joining the Seymour Commercial Club and promoting a new local coal mine. Jackley was a delegate to the county and state Republican conventions and an occasional speaker at civic events, giving the welcome at an old settlers' homecoming and addressing local draftees headed off to World War I.<sup>19</sup>

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1912. See H. B. Hening, ed., *George Curry, 1861-1947: An Autobiography* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1958). Likewise, Robert W. Larson, in "Ballinger vs. Rough Rider George Curry: The Other Feud," *New Mexico Historical Review* 43 (Oct. 1968): 271-90, stresses Curry's ties to Roosevelt but does not mention Jackley. Nevertheless, it seems fair to say that A. M. Jackley was on the periphery of a major episode in American political history.

16. *Wessington Springs True Republican*, 15 June 1911; *Jerauld County Review* (Wessington Springs, S.Dak.), 15 June 1911. Jackley's later business took him to Montana. See *Seymour (Iowa) Leader*, 22 Mar. 1917.

17. *Iowa State Gazetteer and Business Directory 1912-1913*, vol. 16 (Des Moines, Iowa: R. L. Polk & Co., 1912), p. 955. See also *ibid.*, pp. 1951, 2105.

18. *Seymour (Iowa) Democrat*, 5 Oct., 16 Nov. 1911, 15 Feb., 4 Apr., 25 July, 17 Oct. 1912, 13 Feb., 24 Apr. 1913; *Seymour Leader*, 6 Jan., 27 Jan., 9 Mar. 1916, 28 Mar. 1918. Jackley does not appear to have practiced law after moving to South Dakota. A 1931 state law made membership in the new State Bar of South Dakota mandatory for all practicing attorneys in the state, but Jackley's name is not listed on a roster of members published soon after the law went into effect. See South Dakota, *Laws Passed at the Twenty-second Session of the Legislature of the State of South Dakota* (1931), ch. 84 (S.B. 43), pp. 58-60; *South Dakota Bar Journal* 1 (July 1932): 31-47.

19. *Seymour Democrat*, 7 Dec. 1911, 16 May 1912, 8, 15 May, 18 Dec. 1913; *Seymour Leader*, 6 July, 20 July, 31 Aug. 1916, 27 Sept. 1917, 4 July 1918; *Seymour (Iowa) Herald*, 8 July 1920.

Not all of Jackley's work was routine. In November 1918, A. S. Geesey of nearby Albia, Iowa, engaged Jackley to recover some one thousand dollars from his son-in-law, Hayes Van Gorder, of Poplar Bluff, Missouri. Geesey believed that Van Gorder had obtained the money by forgery or other unlawful means. Jackley wrote to Van Gorder, but on the night of 17 November, Geesey was fatally shot in the backyard of his Albia home. Van Gorder, who was also under investigation for malfeasance as a postal worker, was charged in the slaying. In building a case against Van Gorder, Jackley was employed as an official investigator, apparently to help replace law enforcement officers debilitated by the 1918 influenza epidemic.<sup>20</sup>

A jury convicted Van Gorder of manslaughter in 1919, and he appealed the conviction to the Iowa Supreme Court. Jackley's efforts to link Van Gorder to his father-in-law's death were described in the appellate record, but Jackley's conduct as an investigator was not central to the case. The high court in 1923 reversed Van Gorder's conviction on grounds that circumstantial evidence against him was inadequate, but by then he had been convicted on money-order forgery charges and was in the federal penitentiary at Leavenworth, Kansas.<sup>21</sup>

Meanwhile, there were signs that Seymour's economy was faltering. The 1915 state census had shown that the town was losing population. In 1919, Jackley helped to found the Seymour Community Club, an organization dedicated to the advance of the town and its environs. Rosa Jackley would become secretary of the Ladies Civic Improvement League, the women's auxiliary of the Community Club. In 1920, A. M. Jackley ran unsuccessfully for mayor of Seymour as the nominee of the "Citizens Ticket," a group that made a strong plea for a street-paving program. Shortly thereafter, the 1920 federal census indicated a sharp

20. Abstracts and Arguments, [Iowa Supreme Court], Sept. Term, 1923, *State of Iowa, Appellee, vs. Hayes Van Gorder, Appellant*, Monroe County District Court, Appellant's Abstract of Record, pp. 244–45, 247, 285, 335–36, Iowa State Archives, Des Moines (hereafter cited Abstracts and Arguments); *State v. Van Gorder*, 195 N.W. 204; *Albia (Iowa) Republican*, 21 Nov. 1918, 27 Mar. 1919; *Albia (Iowa) Union*, 22 Nov., 26 Nov., 3 Dec. 1918.

21. *Albia Union*, 1 Apr., 16 May 1919; Abstracts and Arguments, pp. 415–18; *Albia (Iowa) Union-Republican*, 18 Oct. 1923; *State v. Van Gorder*, 195 N.W. 204–8; *Pierre Daily Capital Journal*, 25 Mar. 1929; *New York Times*, 6 May 1929.



decline in Seymour's population in the preceding decade, a situation that the local newspaper attributed to the closing of a coal mine.<sup>22</sup>

After July 1920, Jackley's name disappeared from the Seymour newspaper. His whereabouts and activities for the next four years are a mystery. By this time, he may have concluded that Seymour's economy did not offer a good future. His interest in western lands, in evidence during his sojourn in New Mexico Territory, may have led him to seek opportunities elsewhere. A city directory reference to an A. M. Jackley residing in Denver in 1924, occupation "lab[orer]", is the only "paper trail" tidbit between mid-1920 and mid-1925 presently available.<sup>23</sup> Many years later, Jackley recalled two tragedies in 1920 that clearly shaped his life, if not his apparent departure that year from Seymour. In New Mexico in 1905, he had developed an interest in rattlesnakes. Hunting them became a hobby, and he said that in 1920 the deaths from rattlesnake bites of two youngsters residing in different places led him to see the vipers as a menace. Jackley was acquainted with these children, which undoubtedly intensified his desire to fight rattlers.<sup>24</sup> Whatever he was doing from 1920 to 1925, his wife and son remained in Seymour, except for summer visits to her parents' home in Wessington Springs. Rosa was active in women's groups and other local functions in Seymour, where she taught high school English.<sup>25</sup>

In mid-1925, A. M. Jackley apparently settled in Pierre, where his brother John had lived for many years. In July, Rosa, probably accompanied by their son Albert, joined him in the capital city. Unsurpris-

22. *Seymour Leader*, 10 Feb. 1916; *Seymour Herald*, 6 Nov. 1919, 19 Feb., 18, 25 Mar., 1 Apr., 17 June 1920.

23. Ancestry.com, *U.S. City Directories, 1821–1989*, online database, Provo, Utah, 2011. A search of Newspaperarchive.com yielded no information as to Jackley's whereabouts during this period.

24. *Rapid City Daily Journal*, 1 Oct. 1937; *Daily Huronite and Plainsman* (Huron, S.Dak.), 19 Nov. 1944.

25. *Seymour Herald*, 5 Aug., 9 Sept. 1920, 13 Jan., 1 Sept. 1921, 19 Jan., 11 May, 8 June, 7 Sept., 5 Oct., 21 Dec. 1922, 25 Jan., 10 May, 24 May, 7 June, 30 Aug. 1923, 10 Jan., 21 Feb., 24 Apr., 8 May, 17 July, 4 Sept., 18 Dec. 1924, 15 Jan., 21 May 1925. The 1925 Iowa state census shows Rosa B. Jackley and son Albert as living in a rented house in Seymour. Her marital status appears to be listed as "widow." Seymour, Wayne Co., Iowa, in Iowa Census, 1925, RG 36, roll 400.

ingly, given his background, Jackley specialized in agricultural real estate.<sup>26</sup> By December 1927, he was well enough established in Pierre to address the dinner meeting of the city's Commercial Club on some major changes in farming in central South Dakota. Noting that a large amount of "raw prairie" had been initially cultivated in Hughes, Hyde, and Sully counties in 1925–1926, he emphasized the role that tractors were playing in agricultural innovations. As to positive trends, Jackley said that "farmers have awakened to the necessity for deeper ploughing, earlier planting and more intense cultivation." Indicative of his own business, he said that many persons from the East had contacted him about renting land that already had buildings. He concluded that "careful, conservative and intelligent management" was the key to financial success in agriculture.<sup>27</sup>

In December 1928, Jackley had been elected as a director of the Pierre Commercial Club and by the following month was president.<sup>28</sup> In 1930, he set forth a booster theme, "Pierre the friendly city—where the whole state meets." He apparently served as president of the Commercial Club (later renamed the Capital City Chamber of Commerce) until 1935.<sup>29</sup>

26. *Pierre Daily Capital Journal*, 9 July 1925. A search of the 1925 South Dakota state census, roll GS 2368722, Family History Center, Omaha, Nebr. (original in State Archives Collection, South Dakota State Historical Society, Pierre) did not show A. M. Jackley as living in the state; hence, the fact that he was residing in Pierre in July suggests his recent arrival. Many years later, an obituary stated that "In 1924 the [A. M. Jackley] family moved to Pierre, where Jackley engaged in the real estate business." See *Pierre Daily Capital Journal*, 24 Feb. 1950. However, Rosa and Albert Jr. lived in Seymour through the spring of 1925. See *Seymour Herald*, 18 June 1925. The 1930 United States census listed Jackley as a real-estate agent. See Pierre, Hughes Co., S.Dak., in U.S., Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Fifteenth Census of the United States, 1930*, National Archives Microfilm Publication T626, roll 2224, p. 10-B.

27. *Pierre Daily Capital Journal*, 21 Dec. 1927. See also *Pierre Daily Dakotan*, 11 Dec. 1927; *Pierre Daily Capital Journal*, 14 Dec. 1927, 16 Apr., 13 June 1928. Jackley's Commercial Club speech suggests that he was an advocate of the general current in high plains agriculture known as "dry farming." For a brief treatment of this topic, see Mary W. M. Hargreaves, "The Dry Farming Movement in Retrospect," *Agricultural History* 51 (Jan. 1977): 149–65.

28. *Pierre Daily Capital Journal*, 12 Dec. 1928, 5 Jan. 1929.

29. Harold H. Schuler, *Pierre since 1910* (Pierre, S.Dak.: By the Author, 1998), pp. 232–33, 265.

Pierre residents got an interesting glimpse into Jackley's past in March 1929, when the Associated Press reported the perverse ingenuity of a federal prisoner, Hayes Van Gorder, who had forged documents that brought about his release from Leavenworth Penitentiary. His freedom was brief, because his over-exuberance in again forging money orders led to his apprehension. When the story broke, Jackley made known his prominent role in bringing Van Gorder to trial for the murder of A. S. Geesey.<sup>30</sup>

As Jackley was getting established in Pierre in 1925, he also filed a homestead claim in Crook County, Wyoming, some 225 miles to the west. This step may have been an outgrowth of his early promotion of western real estate, but his wife's parents, the Marshalls of Wessington Springs, also acquired rural property near the town of Sundance, Wyoming. The summer of 1926 found the Marshalls and Rosa, accompanied by young Albert, as seasonal residents on separate properties. That both A. M. and Rosa Jackley filed homestead claims in Wyoming illustrates the persistence of the American frontier. In July 1931, he received title to 160 acres under the Homestead Act of 1862. Like many other homesteaders on the last frontier, he fulfilled the legal requirements without living on the land full time, but he apparently had local help in tending his livestock during his absences. Including this property, the Jackleys came to own 720 acres northwest of Sundance.<sup>31</sup>

30. *Centerville (Iowa) Daily Iowegian*, 20 Mar. 1929; *Pierre Daily Capital Journal*, 20, 21, 25 Mar. 1929; *New York Times*, 20 Mar. 1929. Coincidentally, Geesey had a nephew, Lloyd Gessey, who was an undertaker in Pierre until 1928. The *Capital Journal* article of 21 March erred on two points when it stated that "Van Gorder was run down, after a long investigation, by A. M. Jackley who was then a special agent in the United States department of justice. He was not sent to Leavenworth on account of his money forgeries, but for the murder of the uncle of a business man who, until recently, resided in Pierre." As noted above, Jackley was engaged by Iowa law enforcement authorities to work on the Van Gorder-Geesey homicide case, which was investigated and tried solely under state jurisdiction.

31. *Pierre Daily Capital Journal*, 3 Apr. 1929; *Sundance (Wyo.) Times*, 15 July, 2 Sept. 1926, 5 May, 10 Nov. 1927, 4 Apr. 1929, 4 Dec. 1930; personal communication, George Shaner, National Archives and Records Service, Washington, D.C., to author, 7 Nov. 2012, noting A. M. Jackley's Homestead Act filing of 28 Sept. 1925; Patent No. 1048588, U.S. General Land Office, from Register of Land Office, Buffalo, Wyo., to Albert M. Jackley, July [date

Jackley's real-estate marketing work and his experience as a Wyoming homesteader had given him much exposure to nature. That he enjoyed the outdoors is suggested in an August 1927 newspaper squib relating that "A. M. Jackley brought in some mammoth wild currants from the gulches near Pierre."<sup>32</sup> In 1931, Jackley made treks to the Badlands, accompanied by persons from that area and a man from Iowa. During a spring journey, a man from Scenic, South Dakota, discovered a "magnificent and highly prized specimen of agate," which the Iowan, an agate collector, acquired.<sup>33</sup> Later, a Badlands resident accompanying Jackley discovered the three-foot-wide skull of a prehistoric creature identified as a "Titanotherium" (titanotherium), which they then excavated. The agate and the skull went on display at the Pierre Commercial Club, and a news story said that Badlands explorations held the "promise of developing something of interest to lovers of this scenic wonderland."<sup>34</sup> The following summer, Jackley worked on excavating a "large mammal"—apparently the creature that had been discovered in 1931—which he hoped to display on-site.<sup>35</sup> He continued these adventures—or ventures—and in 1934 a Pierre jewelry store displayed "geodes of different colors, and sand calcite crystals" that Jackley had gathered in the Badlands.<sup>36</sup> There, he later discovered a fossil ammonite, which a national press dispatch described as "25 inches in diameter, almost geometrically perfect and in a rare state of preservation."

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illegible] 1931 and Warranty Deed, Rosa B. Jackley to Albert Marshall Jackley, 27 Feb. 1950, both at Crook County Courthouse, Sundance, Wyo.

32. *Pierre Daily Dakotan*, 3 Aug. 1927.

33. *Ibid.*, 19 May 1931.

34. *Ibid.*, 9 Sept. 1931. *See also* *ibid.*, 10, 28 July, 12, 16 Sept. 1931. John Paul Gries, in his *Roadside Geology of South Dakota* (Missoula, Mont.: Mountain Press Publishing, 1996), p. 195, noted that a titanotherium "must have resembled a rhinoceros with a severe glandular problem." Largely through the efforts of Senator Peter Norbeck, congressional authorization in 1929 led ten years later to the creation of Badlands National Monument, now Badlands National Park. *See* Carl R. Swartzlow and Robert F. Upton, *Badlands National Monument South Dakota*, Natural History Handbook Series No. 2 (Washington, D.C.: National Park Service, 1962), pp. 44–45; Linda M. Hasselstrom, *Roadside History of South Dakota* (Missoula, Mont.: Mountain Press Publishing, 1994), p. 341.

35. *Pierre Daily Dakotan*, 4, 31 Aug. 1932.

36. *Ibid.*, 16 July 1934.

Jackley considered this discovery his most notable in two decades of searching for fossils.<sup>37</sup>

Although Jackley's interest in rattlesnakes dated from his life in New Mexico, he may have encountered them in his home area in Iowa. In 1846, as the Mormons emigrated westward through southern Iowa, rattlesnakes proved a significant menace at a supply and resting point they called Garden Grove, not far from the future Seymour. Indeed, in the early twentieth century, there were occasional reports of persons being bitten by rattlesnakes in south-central Iowa, at least one of which proved fatal.<sup>38</sup> In his later years, Jackley remarked, "When I was a small boy, most people declared that during 'Dog Days' [August] rattlesnakes were more dangerous than at any other time of the year," a comment suggesting that the creatures were part of his childhood environment.<sup>39</sup>

In October 1928, the *Pierre Capital Journal* noted that "A. M. Jackley and Mr. Campbell, proprietor of the pool hall, brought in six rattlers" for confectionary store operator Al Hildebrandt, who wanted snakeskins to complement his collection of stuffed creatures. Jackley and Campbell, said the newspaper, anticipated an abundant catch of snakes "as the dry weather is forcing the rattlers to congregate in dens along the Bad river and Missouri river bluffs."<sup>40</sup>

37. *Times and Daily News Leader* (Burlingame-San Mateo, Calif.), 11 Jan. 1937.

38. Richard E. Bennett, *Mormons at the Missouri, 1846–1852: "And Should We Die"* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), pp. 39, 249 (note); Loren N. Horton, "The Worst That I Had Yet Witnessed": Mormon Diarists Cross Iowa in 1846," *Iowa Heritage* 77 (Summer 1996): 72; *Council Bluffs (Iowa) Evening Nonpareil*, 6 July 1920, 28 July, 7 Aug. 1922.

39. A. M. Jackley, "Traits and Behaviors of Rattlesnakes," transcript of radio address, KGFX, Pierre, S.Dak., 14 Mar. 1946, "Rattlesnakes" folder, Vertical Files, State Archives Collection (SAC), South Dakota State Historical Society (SDSHS), Pierre.

40. *Daily Capital Journal*, 4 Oct. 1928. Jackley's snake-hunting companion was apparently David C. Campbell. See Manuscript Population Schedule, Pierre, Hughes Co., S.Dak., in *Fifteenth Census*, roll 2224, p. 111. For Hildebrandt's business, see *ibid.*, p. 104. After Prohibition, Hildebrandt touted his business as "Downtown—At The Old Stand—The Place They All Talk About—Second Largest Private Museum in The United States. Home Of Budweiser Beer." See *Pierre, South Dakota, Classified Directory, 1936–1937*, p. 10, SAC, SDSHS.

In the autumn of 1932, the South Dakota Department of Agriculture engaged Jackley to work with a department staff member on a prototype rattlesnake-elimination program. Indeed, Secretary of Agriculture Loyson G. Troth sought to raise public awareness of the danger rattlesnakes posed for people, livestock, and birds and had high praise for Jackley's skill in eradicating the snakes in their dens. Although Troth hoped that the legislature would fund a rattlesnake-abatement program, such an initiative would have an uphill fight, and not until 1937 did state lawmakers approve paying Jackley \$187.50 for his 1932 work.<sup>41</sup>

Indeed, Jackley seems to have earned at least some of his livelihood in rattlesnake-hunting, including the sale of live snakes to medical colleges and other institutions. This activity, plus his own study of prairie rattlers, meant that he had to keep inventory somewhere. At one time, his house in Pierre reportedly held "more than 1,000 live rattlers."<sup>42</sup> Professor Howard K. Gloyd of the University of Michigan and San Diego scholar Laurence M. Klauber utilized his ability to provide them with living prairie rattlesnakes. More important in the long run was the fact that Jackley was beginning to build excellent relationships with Gloyd and Klauber, which would advance knowledge about the species. His unusual activity brought him publicity in newspapers across the nation, including a report that in the fall of 1933 he had "captured more than 1100 rattlers alive."<sup>43</sup>

At the same time, in the autumn of 1933 and the spring of 1934, Jackley led efforts to eliminate rattlesnakes around Onida. In the summer of 1934, a rancher near Pierre, plagued by coyotes killing sheep, engaged him to get rid of the predators; in the process, he also dispatched some rattlers. Referring to Jackley's prominence in such work, a Pierre journalist reported that "A. M. generally gets what he goes after, and

41. *Pierre Daily Dakotan*, 7 Dec. 1932; South Dakota Legislative Research Council, Issue Memorandum 98-06 (20 Apr. 1998), p. 2, <http://legis.state.sd.us/IssueMemos/IssueMemos/im98-06.pdf>, accessed 12 Sept. 2013.

42. *Titusville (Pennsylvania) Herald*, 1 Nov. 1937.

43. *Salt Lake Tribune* (Salt Lake City, Utah), 18 Mar. 1934. For Jackley's obtaining snakes for "Harold" Gloyd, see *Pierre Daily Dakotan*, 27, 30 Sept., 4 Oct. 1932. For his shipment to Klauber, see dispatch from Pierre in *Helena (Mont.) Independent*, 13 Jan. 1934, and *Sandusky (Ohio) Register*, 13 Jan. 1934. The story, which misspells Klauber's last name, claimed that Jackley shipped him "four boxes" totaling "750 live rattlesnakes."



his services are requested from all sections.”<sup>44</sup> That snakes were sometimes a problem in the capital city itself is suggested in a newspaper announcement that Jackley made in early October 1934—the high season for rattlesnake movement:

#### NOTICE

If the people of Pierre will pay me the sum of fifty dollars I will locate the places where the rattlesnakes are hibernating in or close to the city, including a group not far from the north cemetery, and then with the aid of a few good Pierre sportsmen, get rid of them this fall or spring. I am asking no personal favor in this, but rather offering to render a public service. This requires hard work, and although the demand upon me to eradicate rattlers far exceeds my capacity, I will concentrate on this if I secure the assistance stated.

A. M. JACKLEY<sup>45</sup>

Jackley used the press to make South Dakotans aware of his campaign against rattlesnakes. After he wrote to the *Aberdeen Morning American*, that newspaper summarized his arguments in a 1933 editorial, stressing his contention that although much money had been spent in battling grasshoppers, prairie dogs, wolves, and other pests or predators that afflicted farmers and ranchers, money had not been spent combating rattlesnakes. As the newspaper noted, Jackley said that by simply locating the dens where rattlers hibernated—typically rocky areas with subterranean fissures reaching below the frostline—it would not be difficult to destroy the creatures by clubbing or shooting them. Supporting Jackley’s campaign against the snakes, the *Morning American* observed, “Every year their venomous fangs take a toll of lives.” Whatever Jackley’s thinking on the subject, the newspaper jumped to a dubious conclusion about the impact of rattlesnakes upon South Dakota tourism. “No doubt,” wrote the editor, “the fact that the west river country is infested with death dealing reptiles, keeps many tourists out of that part of the state.” He went on to add that “so long as

44. *Pierre Daily Dakotan*, 4 Aug. 1934. See also *Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader*, 1 May 1934.

45. *Pierre Daily Dakotan*, 6 Oct. 1934.

the Black Hills harbor their snakes[,] the Lake Region of northeastern South Dakota will profit.”<sup>46</sup>

Not everyone welcomed Jackley’s crusade, and in the summer of 1934, he made public a formal statement entitled “The Eradication of Rattlesnakes in South Dakota Is Opposed.” Without naming the foes of his proposed program, he asserted, “Those of us who have looked upon the still form of a child lying on the prairie with a rattlesnake coiled beside it or have seen one bitten and suffer death cannot take kindly this opposition. Too many children have already been sacrificed through lack of understanding and intelligent action.” According to Jackley, “These opponents contend that an organized campaign to exterminate these snakes would cause unfavorable publicity and therefore should not be supported.” The foes of his campaign, he said, “loudly proclaim that rattlesnakes are few and rarely seen,” but “we can prove there are an average of at least one thousand rattlesnakes to the township over a wide area by bringing them in alive as evidence. They assert that the damage to livestock is trifling but we can show that it is extensive.” Jackley added, “Politicians are against this undertaking because it does not offer attractive employment and call for a large expenditure like similar [pest abatement] campaigns.” In closing his defense of a rattlesnake-elimination program, he wrote, “Let the blood of future victims stain the hands of those who are opposed to this service.” A postscript advised, “Anyone wanting full details is invited to call on me in Pierre, S.D.”<sup>47</sup>

Jackley obviously wanted to rally public support for a state-sponsored eradication program without naming his plan’s critics, which would entrench political opposition. Without mentioning either Jackley or the opponents of his plan, the *Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader* supported a rattlesnake-abatement program.<sup>48</sup> Later in the summer of 1934, in an apparent reference to the regime of the Democratic governor Tom Berry, a newspaper story noted that although Jackley had

46. *Aberdeen Morning American*, 25 Mar. 1933.

47. Undated printed statement by Jackley, “Rattlesnakes” folder, SAC, SDSHS. An unidentified newspaper clipping, dated 28 June 1934, reprinted Jackley’s statement, minus the addendum. Steve Thompson collection, Pierre, S.Dak.

48. *Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader*, 25 June 1934.

sought “administration support” for his campaign to eliminate rattlesnakes, “the administration does not wish to advertise that South Dakota has snakes. To have dust, hot winds, dry lakes, and no money is bad enough—but snakes!” Ridiculing the opposition to Jackley’s plan, the author stated, “Sure there are snakes, they say, but who wants to hunt them up[?] Except Jackley.”<sup>49</sup>

At a time when drought and depression were devastating South Dakota, it is perhaps understandable that the governor and perhaps other leaders might wish to control damage to the state’s image. Some sentiment against public discussion of a rattlesnake danger seemed durable, but whatever Governor Berry’s view on the topic, January 1937 brought the Republican administration of Governor Leslie Jensen to power.<sup>50</sup>

As the twenty-fifth session of the South Dakota Legislature began, Jackley was busy at the capitol advocating rattlesnake abatement. On 2 February 1937, Guy Harding of Pierre introduced a reptile-control bill in the South Dakota House of Representatives. Although newly elected, Harding was a longtime resident of Hughes County and had been active in local politics.<sup>51</sup> Petitions in support of rattlesnake extermination arrived at the capitol, and as one person said, “At least a part of these contend that A. M. Jackley, who has spent a large amount of time gratuitously in this work, should be put at the head of the undertaking.”<sup>52</sup> On 27 February, the house of representatives approved Harding’s measure by a 91-to-9 margin, and the senate soon passed the bill in a 35-to-8 vote. Although seven of the nine nay votes in the house and seven of the eight nay votes in the senate came from legislators who lived east of rattlesnake country, Representative C. M. Fonder of Peever, in the northeastern corner of the state, had initiated house dis-

49. “The Battle of The Rattlesnakes,” unidentified newspaper clipping, 23 Aug. 1934, Steve Thompson collection.

50. *Pierre Daily Capital Journal*, 25 Jan. 1937; Herbert S. Schell, *History of South Dakota*, 4th ed., rev. John E. Miller (Pierre: South Dakota State Historical Society Press, 2004), p. 296.

51. *Pierre Daily Capital Journal*, 20 Oct. 1936, 25 Jan. 1937; South Dakota, *House Journal, Twenty-fifth Session* (1937), p. 197; South Dakota, *Legislative Manual* (1937), p. 490.

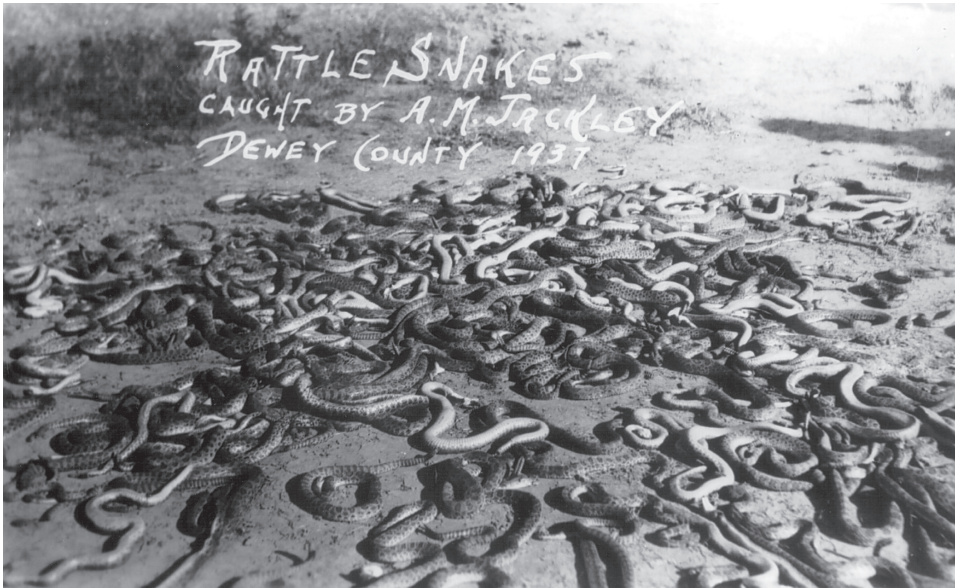
52. *Pierre Daily Capital Journal*, 11 Feb. 1937.

cussion in support of the bill by noting recent snakebite cases.<sup>53</sup> “The best way to get rid of the rattlesnakes,” Fonder said, “is to get them in big lots at their dens in the fall.”<sup>54</sup> This approach was basic to Jackley’s mode of operation.

The new law that took effect 6 March 1937 appropriated five thousand dollars for a Rodent, Mammal and Reptile Control Fund to be administered by the director of the Fish and Game Department. The money, to be expended no later than 1 December 1938, was to be used to conduct “an educational campaign in the control and extermination

53. *House Journal* (1937), pp. 758–59; South Dakota, *Journal of the Senate, Twenty-fifth Session* (1937), pp. 946–47; *Legislative Manual* (1937), indicating constituencies of members; *Pierre Daily Capital Journal*, 27 Feb. 1937. For prairie rattlesnake distribution in South Dakota, see Steve Thompson and Doug Backlund, *South Dakota Snakes: A Guide to Snake Identification* ([Pierre]: South Dakota Department of Game, Fish and Parks [n.d.]), p. 21.

54. *Pierre Daily Capital Journal*, 11 Feb. 1937.



Beginning in 1937, the South Dakota Department of Agriculture began formal efforts to eliminate the rattlesnake menace. These snakes were likely rounded up in the fall as they moved into their dens.

of harmful and destructive rodents, mammals, and reptiles,” and the director was authorized “to employ such methods as he may deem advisable to destroy such pests.” Bounties were not allowed to be paid from the fund. The law also stipulated that “the records pertaining to this campaign shall be kept and any information of scientific value that is obtained shall be recorded and preserved for the benefit of the State.”<sup>55</sup>

It was implicitly clear that rattlesnake elimination was the sole intent of the law and that Jackley would be in charge of its day-to-day implementation. From the outset, there were two key elements to his work: educating and organizing South Dakotans in rattlesnake abatement and carrying on his own field work toward this goal. In 1937, the first year of the program, Jackley estimated that ten thousand rattlesnakes were killed; of these, he attributed the dispatching of some seven thousand to people whom he had trained, while he slew the remainder. Associated Press reports of Jackley’s autumn campaign at snake dens in the Timber Lake, Faith, and Dupree areas gave national attention to his new job. In 1939, the legislature appropriated two thousand dollars to continue the program, but by the following spring, the money was exhausted. When it appeared that Jackley’s state-sponsored efforts were at an end, word came from the governor’s office that funds had been found to keep Jackley on the job during the optimum snake-killing months of 1940. From the standpoint of abatement, this development was fortuitous, for in early autumn rattlers were reported as exceptionally abundant.<sup>56</sup> The following year, the legislature placed the program under the state’s secretary of agriculture and made a biennial appropriation of five thousand dollars for a Reptile Control Fund. This statute dropped mammals and rodents from the program. Reptile

55. South Dakota, *Laws Passed at the Twenty-fifth Session of the Legislature of the State of South Dakota* (1937), ch. 138 (H.B. 57), pp. 165–66.

56. Editorials from *Bison Courier* and *Wilmot Enterprise*, reprinted in *Pierre Daily Capital Journal*, 23, 25 Mar. 1937, respectively; “Lone Wolf” In Rattlesnake War Wins Recognition of Lawmakers,” unidentified newspaper clipping datelined Pierre, 9 Mar. [1937], and “Killing 10,000 Rattlesnakes,” unidentified newspaper clipping, both in “Rattlesnakes” folder, SAC, SDSHS; *Titusville Herald*, 1 Nov. 1937; *New York Times*, 31 Oct. 1937; South Dakota, *Laws Passed at the Twenty-sixth Session of the Legislature of the State of South Dakota* (1939), ch. 252 (S.B. 189), p. 320; *West River Progress*, 9, 23 May, 26 Sept. 1940.

control would remain under the South Dakota Department of Agriculture for the duration of the program's existence.<sup>57</sup>

Jackley was a most effective communicator. A report of a talk on rattlesnakes he gave in Murdo in 1937 stated, "Mr. Jackley spoke for close onto an hour Monday evening and we cannot recall a speaker who has ever appeared on a program here who held the close attention throughout that was accorded Mr. Jackley. He spoke without notes and in the limited time given him he covered a multitude of angles of the rattlesnake's life."<sup>58</sup>

Just over six months after the enactment of the first reptile-control statute, a high-profile tragedy highlighted the importance of Jackley's work. On the afternoon of 17 September 1937, Dr. Paul D. Emerson, a senior soil scientist for the United States Soil Conservation Service based in Rapid City, drove west of town to the Rim Rock Trail in order to secure a soil sample for use in a presentation at a scholarly conference. Parking his car off the trail, he apparently set forth to gather his sample when a rattlesnake bit his left ankle. Returning—perhaps running—to his car for his snakebite kit, he placed a tourniquet above the bite to stem the venom's flow. He then cut the wound with a razor blade, preparatory to using a suction pump to extract the venom. Three days later, Emerson's body was found, pump in hand, next to his car. A Pennington County coroner's jury confirmed that rattlesnake venom, possibly augmented by shock, caused the death of the fifty-year-old scholar who had served on the faculty of Iowa State College

57. South Dakota, *Proceedings of the Senate, Twenty-seventh Legislative Session* (1941), p. 869; South Dakota, *Proceedings of the House of Representatives, Twenty-seventh Legislative Session* (1941), pp. 1090–91; South Dakota, *Laws Passed at the Twenty-seventh Session of the Legislature of the State of South Dakota* (1941), ch. 256 (S.B. 175), p. 286. The senate vote in favor of the reptile abatement program was 33–0, and the tally in the house was 60–11. Six of the house nay votes came from members representing areas clearly east of rattlesnake country; only one of the five nay votes was cast by a member from west of the Missouri River. See South Dakota, *Legislative Manual* (1941), for data on legislators. For the strong West River support for Jackley's work, see *Gregory Times-Advocate*, 17 Apr. 1941. Jackley's office records have not been retained. Interview with Steve Thompson, Department of Game, Fish and Parks, Pierre, S.Dak., 16 Mar. 1999.

58. Unidentified newspaper clipping, probably *Murdo Coyote*, 14 Jan. 1937, Steve Thompson collection.



before joining the Soil Conservation Service in Huron.<sup>59</sup>

Seven days after the discovery of Dr. Emerson's body, the *Rapid City Journal* ran a lengthy editorial, "Let's Remove Menace From Rattlesnakes," noting that two youngsters walking to the Rim Rock School had narrowly escaped being bitten by a rattler. The *Journal* urged that rural schools be supplied with snakebite kits. Stating that Rapid and Dark canyons just west of the city were "infested by rattlesnakes," the editorial stressed that an abatement effort in this part of Pennington County was essential. Probably aware that the Associated Press had put the story of Emerson's death on the wire, the editorial writer was relieved that the tragedy had not happened during the Black Hills tourist season. The incident, said the *Journal*, "constituted a warning that should be heeded by public authorities before another tourist season rolls around. Publicity attending a rattlesnake fatality at or near the beginning of the tourist rush could not fail to stem the enthusiasm of would-be visitors and might seriously cut the number we look forward to in 1938." As the newspaper said, Jackley's services were needed in those areas of the Black Hills where rattlesnakes were a menace.<sup>60</sup> Indeed, shortly thereafter, Jackley addressed sixty Soil Conservation Service employees in Rapid City on the topic.<sup>61</sup>

The peak periods for Jackley's field work came in the spring, when rattlesnakes were leaving their dens after winter hibernation, and in autumn, when they were returning to their dens. Given this pattern, dens were logical central points for snake eradication, observation, and collection. As Jackley said, "There are just two essential requirements

59. *Rapid City Daily Journal*, 21 Sept. 1937.

60. *Ibid.*, 28 Sept. 1937. Because stories about the relationship of snakes to humans are inherently interesting, the *Journal* editor's trepidation about publicity arising from a rattlesnake bite fatality is understandable. For example, see Associated Press stories in *Lincoln (Nebr.) Star*, 21 Sept. 1937, and *New York Times*, 22 Sept. 1937. The editor of a small-town Nebraska weekly, having read the story of Emerson's death in the daily press, repeated the basic details and noted the abundance of rattlesnakes in some places. See *Elmwood Leader-Echo*, 23 Sept. 1937. However, in an editorial on the incident, the *Lincoln Star* (21 Sept.) downplayed the danger of rattlesnakes "in this western country" and suggested that copperheads near eastern cities posed a more serious problem.

61. *Rapid City Daily Journal*, 4 Oct. 1937.

for a den, namely, depth and dryness.”<sup>62</sup> Locating dens, typically prairie-dog towns, badger holes, protected places in bluffs and gullies, and the south sides of buttes and ridges, was a cumulative process. In 1941 he said, “I have examined close to 500 and know of the approximate location of many others.” To illustrate the geographic distribution of dens, he used red marks on a state map.<sup>63</sup>

Jackley repeatedly stated that temperature was the most critical consideration in finding rattlesnakes. Air temperatures between 72 and 85 degrees Fahrenheit were most congenial to the reptiles, but he emphasized that changing weather and disturbances of the earth, such as that caused by farm machinery, could result in more rattler movement and visibility. He related the experience of workers near Kennebec in the autumn of 1941 who found that rattlesnakes became increasingly numerous as the crew crisscrossed a field of some five acres with their truck in the process of collecting windrowed hay. Working defensively, the men killed seventy-seven rattlers. Jackley later explained that vibrations or other disturbances from the truck frightened the snakes out of their “numerous small burrows.”<sup>64</sup> This episode prompted a one-paragraph Associated Press story headlined “To Rattle a Rattler: Rhumba on His Roof,” again bringing Jackley’s name to newspaper readers far from South Dakota.<sup>65</sup>

Given South Dakota’s climate, rattlers were prone to diurnal activity in the spring and autumn and were nocturnal during the heat of summer. This propensity was especially relevant to persons engaged in

62. A. M. Jackley, “Campaign for the Control of Rattlesnakes,” [1937], p. 1, “Rattlesnakes” folder, SAC, SDSHS.

63. A. M. Jackley, “Report of Reptile Control Campaign,” [1941], p. 6, *ibid.* See also *ibid.*, p. 1; interview with Steve Thompson, 16 Mar. 1999. Julie Blumer, in “The Rattler Battler,” *South Dakota Magazine* 4 (Sept.–Oct. 1988): 15, noted that Thompson had told her that pins on Jackley’s map indicated six hundred den sites, while the *Daily Huronite and Plainsman* for 10 March 1946 stated that Jackley had located fifteen hundred dens.

64. Jackley, “Report of Reptile Control Campaign,” [1941], pp. 2–3. He also relates this story in Jackley, “Bulletin: Temperature and Weather,” p. 1, “Rattlesnakes” folder, SAC, SDSHS.

65. *Sheboygan (Wisc.) Press*, 24 Mar. 1942; *Emporia (Kans.) Daily Gazette*, 2 Apr. 1942; *Lima (Ohio) News*, 11 Apr. 1942; *Lethbridge (Alta.) Herald*, 5 May 1942.

sheep production, an important aspect of the economy in northwestern South Dakota. As Jackley related in 1941, “Sheep-herders are now aware of the fact that during the summer, the time to look for rattlers is in late evening and early morning and . . . many of them have become expert snake hunters. I interviewed a number of them in Harding County early last fall and was advised that many of them had killed close to 100 each—one had 126 rattles to show.”<sup>66</sup>

Although Jackley advised wiping out rattlers at their dens, he noted in 1941 that an important facet of the rattlesnake-abatement campaign had been to encourage motorists who spotted rattlers to run over or stop and kill the creatures. This aggressive approach, coupled with snake-killing during the development of United States Highways 12 and 212, was particularly effective in Armstrong, Corson, and Dewey counties.<sup>67</sup>

In waging his anti-rattlesnake drive, Jackley declared, “Snake hunting has been shamefully neglected.” One explanation for this lapse, he said, was that many people would kill rattlers if they encountered them, but were reluctant to seek out the creatures. “Since they are repulsive to most people there are very few who hunt them,” he wrote. “One who closely observes and studies their habits is considered eccentric if not sub-normal.”<sup>68</sup>

As Jackley began his state-sponsored work in 1937, he emphasized the necessity of having snake-hunters ready to undertake eradication efforts at local dens at the time of seasonal movement. “In order to accomplish this,” he said, “a certain group should be responsible for operations at each individual den, with someone in charge who has had experience.”<sup>69</sup> Jackley used various methods to build this local base of

66. Jackley, “Report of Reptile Control Campaign” [1941], p. 10. *See also* “Bulletin,” p. 3.

67. Jackley, “Report of Reptile Control Campaign” [1941], pp. 8–9. For an illustration of this aggressive approach, *see West River Progress*, 10 July 1941. Armstrong County became part of Dewey County in 1952, after enabling legislation was passed in 1951. *See South Dakota, Laws Passed at the Thirty-second Session of the Legislature of the State of South Dakota* (1951), ch. 37 (H.B. 121), pp. 38–39.

68. A. M. Jackley, untitled, undated manuscript, “Rattlesnakes” folder, SAC, SDSHS.

69. Jackley, “Campaign for the Control of Rattlesnakes” [1937], p. 4.

support, including public presentations made in the locales he visited to hunt snakes.

One such trip to Gregory, chronicled by the *Gregory Times Advocate* in the spring of 1941 was probably typical: “A. M. Jackley, South Dakota’s official rattlesnake eradicator[,] was in Gregory over the week end and while here visited a number of the rattlesnake dens north of Gregory. As usual[,] he had a number of snakes in the back of his pickup, and was busy much of the day showing these specimens and explaining his work to interested groups. Mr. Jackley is never more happy than when explaining to others the habits of rattlesnakes and how to eradicate them.”<sup>70</sup>

Continuing contacts were basic to the anti-rattlesnake program. When snakes began the autumn trek to their dens, Jackley mailed postcards to local participants in the eradication campaign. State highway department officials, county commissioners, and road workers assisted by notifying Jackley of the presence of snakes, which was helpful in locating dens. Likewise, civic groups and the Agricultural Extension Service, including 4-H clubs, aided in the program.<sup>71</sup>

Local newspapers were especially helpful in publicizing the rattlesnake eradication program.<sup>72</sup> The town of Dupree, seat of Ziebach County, was in the heart of rattlesnake country, and Jackley was a frequent visitor to the area. E. L. Schetnan, longtime editor and publisher of the local newspaper, the *West River Progress*, liked to publish “snake stories” and faithfully reported Jackley’s activities. Seasonal headlines might read “Snake Man Was Here Last Week” or “Jackley Is Now Trapping Rattlers.”<sup>73</sup> L. L. Coleman, who edited and published the *Mobridge Tribune*, occasionally accompanied Jackley on snake hunts and on a

70. *Gregory Times-Advocate*, 1 May 1941. Pierre resident Juell Johnson recalled a unique lunchtime meeting in 1946 with Jackley and one of his captive snakes along South Dakota Highway 73 in the Thunder Butte area. See “Remembering Jackley,” *South Dakota Magazine* 21 (May/June 2005): 37.

71. *West River Progress*, 9 Oct. 1941; Jackley, “Report of Reptile Control Campaign” [1941], p. 1.

72. Jackley, “Report of Reptile Control Campaign” [1941], p. 1.

73. *West River Progress*, 17 Sept. 1942, 17 June 1943.



In his work as director of reptile control, Jackley traveled extensively throughout rural South Dakota, eradicating rattlesnakes and educating local residents in his methods.

1941 outing in the Mahto area of Corson County helped him slaughter 189 rattlers.<sup>74</sup>

Jackley also used radio to spread a safety message to people in rattler-prone areas. In a 1946 program, “Rattlesnake Venom, Reaction to Snake Bite & First Aid Treatment,” he explained in clear language the dual impact of the venom’s hemotoxin and neurotoxin upon the human body. Jackley had visited with many individuals who had been bitten by rattlers. No alarmist, he said, “As a result of this investigation, I estimate that fully 75 per cent of the victims had only superficial bites.” He went on to give some instructions to follow in the event of snakebite, highlighting the value of Red Cross first-aid measures.<sup>75</sup>

74. *Mobridge Tribune*, 3 June 1943, 2 Mar. 1950.

75. A. M. Jackley, “Rattlesnake Venom, Reaction to Snake Bite & First Aid Treatment,”

The following month, Jackley took to the airwaves with a talk entitled “Traits and Behavior of Rattlesnakes,” in which he cautioned that rattlesnakes do not always rattle before striking. He went on to discuss factors such as skin-shedding, mating, and air temperature, which had a bearing upon rattlesnake reaction to disturbances.<sup>76</sup>

In his educational work, Jackley had a showman’s flair and the communication skills of a good teacher. Although he was not a professional scientist, he had a scholarly bent, and his background as an attorney also may have impelled him toward the systematic recording of evidence. While observing prairie rattlesnakes for over a generation, Jackley became acquainted with academic herpetologists and assisted them in their work. For example, his experience with rattlesnakes in captivity led him to disagree with the common idea that rattlers mated in the spring. He observed that prairie-rattler mating took place between about 12 August and 15 September. This period was also the time when births occurred. Jackley’s observations helped confirm the research of Dr. Hermann Rahn of the University of Rochester, who found that prairie rattlers experience “deferred fertilization” and give birth biennially, rather than annually. Starting in 1943, Jackley sent female rattlesnakes to Dr. H. C. Severin, a zoologist at South Dakota State College, and his assistant, G. B. Spawn, whose dissection research by 1945 confirmed the biennial birth sequence that Rahn had reported.<sup>77</sup>

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transcript of radio address, KGFX, Pierre, S.Dak., 7 Feb. 1946, “Rattlesnakes” folder, SAC, SDSHS. Of course, the passage of time brought changes in first-aid procedures. Although Jackley took safety precautions in his work, he suffered three rattler bites during his tenure as supervisor of reptile control. Two of these episodes occurred a year apart. See *Rapid City Daily Journal*, 1 Oct. 1937; *West River Progress*, 19 Oct. 1944, 18 Oct. 1945; *New York Times*, 21 Feb. 1950.

76. Jackley, “Traits and Behavior of Rattlesnakes.”

77. South Dakota, 1942–1943 *Annual Report of the Department of Agriculture to the Governor of the State of South Dakota for the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 1943*, pp. 12–13; South Dakota, 1944–1945 *Annual Report of the Department of Agriculture to the Governor of the State of South Dakota for the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 1945*, p. 17. Professor Rahn quoted Jackley’s statement that prairie rattlesnakes mate in late August and early September. See Rahn, “The Reproductive Cycle of the Prairie Rattler,” *Copeia* 4 (28 Dec. 1942): 237. Rattlesnake eggs normally remain inside the mother’s body until the young snakes emerge. Klauber, *Rattlesnakes*, 1:695–96.



As Jackley said, “Now that there doesn’t seem to be any question but that these snakes bear young only every other year, we find that the rate of reproduction is only one half what was formerly the common belief and a very important consideration in this campaign for control.”<sup>78</sup> The scientists’ work showed that litters averaged eleven snakes, or the equivalent of five and one-half yearly. Moreover, Jackley concluded that although scholars typically held that females initially gave birth at age three, owing to their environment, South Dakota rattlesnakes did not give birth until their fourth year. In studying the mating and reproductive pattern of rattlesnakes, Jackley discovered that by late July, females gathered at places he called “rookeries.” Because rookeries were not far from dens, finding concentrations of females in the mating period was a guide to den location.<sup>79</sup>

Although Jackley emphasized the value of organized snake hunting, he had experimented with the use of gas and traps at dens some years prior to his steady employment by the state. The use of both of these methods, he believed, could eliminate about two-thirds of the rattlers. In 1941, Jackley was using poisonous gas in dens on the Cheyenne River Indian Reservation and was said to be contemplating the injection of gas into dens during the winter hibernation. However, by 1947, he had concluded that winter gassing was not highly effective, given that hibernation temperatures of fifty degrees Fahrenheit greatly reduced the snakes’ respiration rate. Hence, he believed that this mode of extermination should be reserved for the autumn and spring.<sup>80</sup>

A drawback to the gassing of rattlers in their dens was that non-poisonous snakes, in particular blue racers and bullsnakes, would also

78. 1942–1943 *Annual Report*, p. 13.

79. Ibid., pp. 13–14; A. M. Jackley, “Review of Activities under the Division of Reptile Control, 1946–1947,” p. 2, “Rattlesnakes” folder, SAC, SDSHS. See also Klauber, *Rattlesnakes*, 1:700. Klauber quotes Jackley as estimating that the average biennial prairie rattlesnake litter was ten.

80. *West River Progress*, 24 Apr., 28 Aug. 1941; South Dakota, 1941–1942 *Annual Report of the Department of Agriculture to the Governor of the State of South Dakota for the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 1942*, p. 10; Jackley, “Review of Activities, 1946–1947,” pp. 1–2. Jackley may have experimented with “hydrocyanic acid gas” (hydrogen cyanide) at snake dens during his temporary employment by the South Dakota Department of Agriculture in the fall of 1932. See *Pierre Daily Dakotan*, 7 Dec. 1932.

be killed. Trapping at dens would provide information on the cohabitation of species, but Jackley found the development of a suitable trap difficult. Badgers, which prey upon rattlesnakes, routinely dislodged his traps. Between 1944 and 1946, however, Jackley perfected his den traps and used them in sixteen West River counties, where he discovered a wide range of ratios of blue racers and bullsnakes to rattlers. He determined that gassing dens would eliminate about forty nonpoisonous snakes for each one hundred rattlers. While this data did not please him, he concluded that a gassing initiative would not threaten these nonpoisonous species.<sup>81</sup> Nevertheless, Jackley did not see trapping and gassing as panaceas in rattlesnake abatement. "Many dens are in rocky places where neither traps nor gas could be used effectively," he noted. "Therefore there is continued need for cooperation in killing the snakes in the old way." In other words, using a stick to beat the reptiles to death.<sup>82</sup>

World War II was an impediment to gassing experiments, but by 1946, Professor Severin, with whom Jackley had cooperated in expanding knowledge of rattlesnake reproduction, was reported to be studying the use of poisons in rattler control. That year, the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, encouraged by South Dakota Representative Francis Case, agreed to begin gassing tests.<sup>83</sup> These experiments with various gas combinations were conducted in the autumns of 1947

81. *West River Progress*, 17 June 1943, 13 May 1948; South Dakota, 1945–1946 *Annual Report of the Department of Agriculture to the Governor of the State of South Dakota for the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 1946*, pp. 16–17. Jackley's perfected trap was described in detail, with photographs, in H. K. Gloyd, "The Problem of Too Many Snakes," *Chicago Naturalist* 7 (1944): 93–95. More evidence of Jackley's observation of prairie rattlesnakes is found in his authorship of a brief essay in which he related evidence accumulated in South Dakota and Wyoming indicating that badgers regarded rattlers as a suitable food source. A. M. Jackley, "Badgers Feed on Rattlesnakes," in "General Notes," *Journal of Mammalogy* 19 (Aug. 1938): 374–75.

82. 1945–1946 *Annual Report*, p. 17. In "Campaign for the Control of Rattlesnakes" [no date], p. 3, "Rattlesnakes" folder, SAC, SDSHS, he advised the use of "a medium sized stick four feet in length," along with "a 3-pronged rake" for control purposes.

83. *Draper (S.Dak.) Tribune*, 11 Apr. 1946; South Dakota, 1946–1947 *Annual Report of the Department of Agriculture to the Governor of the State of South Dakota for the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 1947*, p. 18.

and 1948. The use of cartridges from the Army Chemical Warfare Service and “potassium of cyanide” (probably potassium cyanide) proved unsuccessful, but carbon disulfide and tetrachloroethane brought promising results, as did combinations of disulfide and cyanogas, and cyanogas and ammonia. Then, Innis, Speiden & Company of Niagara Falls, New York, offered to send a chemist to test “war gas” on rattler dens. The state agreed to such tests, which employed a “bomb” that had been used effectively in fighting rodents. However, the firm’s experiments in April 1949 with chloropicrin proved relatively unsuccessful. State Chemist Guy G. Frary analyzed the impact of the gases and helped conduct the chloropicrin tests. By 1949, it was becoming evident that no single gas or combination of gases would be the vehicle for rattlesnake extermination. As Jackley noted, dens varied greatly in their configuration, and using gases was dangerous to humans.<sup>84</sup>

In early October 1946, Jackley led Dr. Howard K. Gloyd, formerly of the University of Michigan and then-director of the museum of the Chicago Academy of Sciences, and Thurston I. Wright, also of the academy, on a trek to West River rattlesnake dens. Jackley had corresponded with Gloyd, a herpetologist, for about fifteen years before meeting him. Describing the purpose of the trip, Gloyd said, “We wanted primarily to learn something about snake dens at first hand, to collect specimens for the Academy and the Lincoln Park Zoological Gardens, and—perhaps most of all—to make motion pictures in color of snakes at their dens.” Good weather at the start of this journey to the Moreau River-Thunder Butte area soon gave way to cold and a snowstorm that prematurely ended the trip.<sup>85</sup> The following October, Jackley took Gloyd and Wright, joined by herpetologists Dr. Charles E. Burt of Topeka, Kansas, and Paul Anderson of Independence, Missouri, on another snake hunt, during which they completed the mo-

84. South Dakota, *Twenty-ninth Annual Report of the South Dakota Department of Agriculture for the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 1949*, pp. 42–45; *West River Progress*, 13 May 1948, 28 Apr. 1949.

85. H. K. Gloyd, “Some Rattlesnake Dens of South Dakota,” *Chicago Naturalist* 9 (1946): 88–97; “Howard K. Gloyd,” [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Howard\\_K\\_Gloyd](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Howard_K_Gloyd), accessed 9 Oct. 2013, summarizes Gloyd’s career.

tion picture. South Dakota Secretary of Agriculture Leslie V. Ausman later said that the film, *Hunting the Prairie Rattlesnake*, “is recognized as probably the best rattlesnake picture ever taken.”<sup>86</sup>

Jackley concluded that the great drought of the 1930s had led to “a very noticeable increase in our rattlesnake population.” He thought that although a decline in the number of farms encouraged this growth, the drier environment “greatly favored” the increase. During the drought, rattlers were born between 12 August and 5 September. Hot and dry years, he noted, were followed by colder and wetter conditions that delayed rattlesnake births until the period 17 August to 1 October. Hence, late-born snakes had less time to find food before cold weather and protracted hibernation menaced their lives. In fact, Jackley discovered that few young snakes could survive their first winter without food. Accordingly, he concluded that the weather pattern following the drought years had stopped the “rapid increase” in rattler population.<sup>87</sup>

Given the rapid weather fluctuations common to the West River area during spring and autumn, Jackley said that the timing of rattlesnakes in departing and returning to their dens was critical. As an example, on a warm October day after the melting of an early snow, some large rattlers were unable to cross a one-yard-wide band of snow remaining at the bottom of a Stanley County gulch relatively near their den. Jackley concluded that many snakes, especially those hunting more food, might take a month to return to their dens. On the other hand, he cited examples of rattlesnakes moving rapidly toward their dens in advance of imminent bad weather. “In some way these snakes are forewarned of approaching changes in weather, and are admirably adapted to the climatic conditions under which they live,” Jackley observed.<sup>88</sup> Despite this adaptability, the environment took its toll, and

86. South Dakota, *Twenty-eighth Annual Report of the South Dakota Department of Agriculture for the Year Ending June 30, 1948*, p. 16. Ausman gave the movie’s title as *Rattlesnakes in South Dakota*. See also *West River Progress*, 2 Oct. 1947; Howard K. Gloyd, Notes on film “Hunting the Prairie Rattlesnake” made by A. M. Jackley and H. K. Gloyd 1946–47,” Steve Thompson collection; *Winner Advocate*, 28 Apr. 1949.

87. 1944–1945 *Annual Report*, pp. 17–18.

88. Jackley, “Report of Reptile Control Campaign” [1941], pp. 3–5.

he concluded that probably “not more than half” of an average litter of eleven rattlesnakes survived to adulthood. This reality meant that once rattlers were obliterated in a given area, their recovery was most difficult.<sup>89</sup>

In April 1942, Jackley went to the construction site of a United States Army ordnance plant at Provo, in the southwestern corner of the state, to organize rattler abatement. A man with a sense of humor, he declared, “[It] seems like men who handle dynamite hadn’t ought to be afraid of rattlesnakes. . . . They sure picked a good rattlesnake country for their project.”<sup>90</sup> Four years later, Jackley was “loaned” to the United States Army Corps of Engineers to help in an eradication effort at Fort Peck, Montana, where the building of a Missouri River dam had displaced rattlesnakes. He later said that the construction work drove some rattlers to the Fort Peck townsite, posing a danger to children. He found that the snake problem was not severe, however, and that it could be quickly solved.<sup>91</sup>

In 1948, reporting on the situation in South Dakota, Jackley said, “The rattlesnake population has been greatly reduced already.” Some people correctly believed that the rattler problem was “virtually solved” in certain areas, but he listed fourteen West River counties in which such was probably not the case. He also noted that “small portions” of the East River counties of Hughes and Sully still had rattlesnake problems.<sup>92</sup>

On 20 February 1950, A. M. Jackley died of coronary thrombosis in Hot Springs, South Dakota, as he and his wife returned from a vacation in the Southwest, his first since becoming supervisor of reptile control.<sup>93</sup> Newspaper stories of his death noted that he had been called

89. *Twenty-eighth Annual Report*, p. 47.

90. *West River Progress*, 23 Apr. 1942. See also *Edgemont (S.Dak.) Tribune*, 22 Apr. 1942.

91. *West River Progress*, 2 May, 16 May 1946; Klauber, *Rattlesnakes*, 1:577, quotes Jackley on the Fort Peck situation.

92. *Twenty-eighth Annual Report*, pp. 46–47. He did not comment upon the status of rattlesnake abatement in the West River counties of Bennett, Harding, Haakon, Lawrence, Mellette, Perkins, and Shannon.

93. Burial Permit, Riverside Cemetery, Pierre, S.Dak.; *Pierre Daily Capital Journal*, 24 Feb. 1950.

**A. M. JACKLEY**

**1880 - 1950**



**He Died in the Service of Humanity**

After Jackley died in 1950, the South Dakota Department of Agriculture dedicated its annual report to the memory of its long-time expert on rattlesnake control.



“the St. Patrick of South Dakota,” and the 1950 report of the State Department of Agriculture declared, “He Died in the Service of Humanity.” The latter document recognized his contributions to zoology but emphasized the value of his work to South Dakotans. “Today,” it said, “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.”<sup>94</sup> In reporting Jackley’s death the *New York Times* stated, “He and volunteers are said to have killed as many as 30,000 rattlesnakes in a year in the westriver [*sic*] range country.”<sup>95</sup> L. L. Coleman of the *Mobridge Tribune*, recounting his experiences with the “rattlesnake exterminator,” declared, “I’ll miss Jackley. And the job of eliminating rattlesnakes in South Dakota has taken a big setback with his death.”<sup>96</sup>

The day after Jackley died, the *Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader* noted that many South Dakotans and others continued to believe that discussion of rattlesnakes did not foster a good image of the state. However, this newspaper, in a community well east of rattler country, stressed the value of Jackley’s work and urged that it be continued “on an intensified basis.”<sup>97</sup> Indeed, on 1 June 1950, Gerald W. Miller, who had taught high-school biology and chemistry in Fort Pierre, became supervisor of the Division of Reptile Control. In announcing the appointment, South Dakota Secretary of Agriculture L. V. Ausman said, “The scientific phase of discovering new and effective methods of extermination requires technical training with which Miller is equipped.”<sup>98</sup> Miller credited Jackley with greatly reducing infestations and announced that although trapping would continue, “the use of poison gases is our most effective method of controlling the rattler population in our state.”<sup>99</sup>

94. South Dakota, *Thirtieth Annual Report of the South Dakota Department of Agriculture for the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 1950*, dedicatory and memorial pages. See also *Hot Springs Star*, 23 Feb. 1950; *West River Progress*, 23 Feb. 1950; Blumer, “Rattler Battler,” pp. 14–15.

95. *New York Times*, 21 Feb. 1950.

96. *Mobridge Tribune*, 2 Mar. 1950.

97. *Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader*, 21 Feb. 1950.

98. *West River Progress*, 1 June 1950.

99. *Thirtieth Annual Report*, pp. 45–46.

Miller continued various experiments and in 1952 reported that high kill rates at dens could be achieved by using the gas produced when two liquid chemicals, carbon disulfide and ethylene dichloride, were mixed. Administering these chemicals was not difficult, but he warned “the average rancher, or person, interested in rattlesnake eradication” to exercise caution, for “the fumes are very deadly when inhaled.”<sup>100</sup>

Miller’s resignation as reptile control officer in 1953 and the appointment of Thomas Myers, a Lyman County native, brought a renewed emphasis upon trapping.<sup>101</sup> In 1955, Richard P. Jacoby, a sixty-eight-year-old veteran rattlesnake hunter from New Underwood who had helped livestock producers with their reptile problems, took over what had become a part-time position beginning with Myers’ tenure. From the outset, Jacoby made it clear that he would rely upon trapping as opposed to gassing. He modified Jackley’s trap design and spent much time building traps. At least officially, the work of the supervisor of rattlesnake eradication was now more specifically, and perhaps more narrowly, focused. Primary emphasis was placed upon rendering schools, school grounds, and public places safe from rattlesnakes, while livestock protection became secondary. In one instance, Jacoby caught a rattler with white paint on it—evidence that the creature had been to a just-painted school building about a mile distant. Jacoby observed that

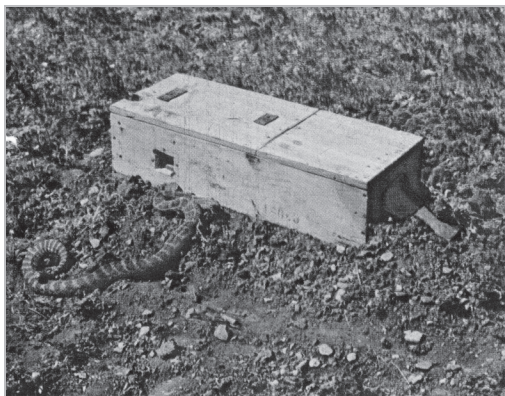
100. South Dakota, *Thirty-second Annual Report of the South Dakota Department of Agriculture for the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 1952*, p. 54. See also South Dakota, *Thirty-first Annual Report of the South Dakota Department of Agriculture for the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 1951*, pp. 51–52.

101. South Dakota, *Thirty-third Annual Report of the South Dakota Department of Agriculture for the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 1953*, pp. 26, 49–50, *Thirty-fourth Annual Report of the South Dakota Department of Agriculture for the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 1954*, pp. 21, 177–80. In his 1954 annual report, Myers said that due to the discovery of many more dens, he would include the use of gas in his 1955 work. Gas, he said, necessitated only one annual trip to a den, while trapping required more visits.

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#### *Facing page*

Other reptile-control officers in South Dakota followed the trail Jackley had blazed. Richard P. Jacoby and some of the Jackley-designed snake traps he modified are featured on this page from the January 1960 issue of *Outdoor Life* magazine.



Trying to reach den from outside, big rattler finds entrance to two-way trap and crawls in. Most are caught coming out of dens

**By R. P. (DICK) JACOBY  
as told to Ben East**

I'M A rattlesnake trapper. For 10 years, from 1938 to 1948, I operated a ranch in southwestern South Dakota, across the Cheyenne River from the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. It was good cattle country, but it was also a prime place for rattlers; I lost a lot of stock to them.

Horses, cattle, sheep, and dogs are all highly vulnerable to snakebite in that country, especially the young animals. An old cow or steer knows enough to avoid rattlesnakes, unless they graze up to the snakes with the wind and don't discover them until it's too late. And you can't ride an experienced horse up to a rattler if he can smell it. But a colt will put his nose out to investigate the sound or scent of a snake, and so will young cattle and sheep. Full-grown stock that knows better will often blunder onto a rattler, and ranch dogs and hunting dogs occasionally do the same. The result is almost sure to be a bite, often on the nose or around the head, and that's likely to mean a dead critter.

A head-bitten horse has about a 50-50 chance of recovering, in my experience, because of its size in relation to the dose of venom it gets. Naturally it takes far more snake poison to kill a 1,200-pound horse than a 160-pound man. The chances of a steer or cow are slimmer than those of a horse, and a sheep that suffers a rattler bite is a goner. So is a dog, nine times out of 10.

My brother-in-law, Martin Madsen, once had six or seven two-year-old colts bitten by the same snake when they snooped in, one after another, to find out what the critter was on top of a big rock. The one that got the first dose was a very sick animal. The second had a bad enough case of snakebite, but not nearly as severe as the first. The rest got off easier and easier, and the last one suffered no more than from a bee sting. The snake had no venom left when the final colt nudged him. That's always true when a rattler strikes several times in quick succession.

I recall a neighbor east of my place on the Cheyenne who turned out 30 mares with their colts to pasture one spring, not realizing the area was heavily infested with snakes. When he rounded up the horse herd in the fall, he had fewer than a dozen colts left. And I once found a sheepherder, with a big herd bedded down around a



Trap with lid lifted on good catch, and showing tunnel leading from den to trap, with hinged plastic trapdoor in place

Dick moves catch from trap to livebox with unique snake hook





the less-visible small rattlers were as poisonous as their larger brethren. Lambs lost to rattlesnake bites were sometimes a significant expense to sheep-raisers, and rattlers preyed upon the nests of prairie chickens and pheasants. If rattlesnakes had diminished since Jackley began the eradication program, they were still abundant; Jacoby reported trapping more than four hundred from one abandoned coal mine in Perkins County.<sup>102</sup>

In 1963, Edward Cronk of Philip was appointed to the April-to-November job. Five years later, he reported a continuing decrease in the rattler population, but he made frequent calls to investigate reports of snakes on school grounds and continued to instruct rural residents on rattlesnake abatement. With seemingly incredible precision, the South Dakota Department of Agriculture in 1973 reported that in the nine seasons from 1963 to 1971, a total of 12,874 rattlesnakes had been exterminated.<sup>103</sup>

The appointment of Steve Thompson as reptile control officer in July 1974 brought to the position a recent zoology graduate from South Dakota State University. Thompson was from northeastern South Dakota, and after he took the position, which now included rodent control, he learned the elements of rattlesnake handling at Reptile Gardens, an animal park and tourist attraction near Rapid City. Although

102. *Mitchell Daily Republic*, 15 Sept. 1960; South Dakota, *Thirty-sixth Annual Report of the South Dakota Department of Agriculture for the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 1956*, pp. 23, 52–55, *Thirty-seventh Annual Report of the South Dakota Department of Agriculture for the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 1957*, pp. 39–41, *Thirty-eighth Annual Report of the South Dakota Department of Agriculture for the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 1958*, pp. 59–62, *Forty-first Annual Report of the South Dakota Department of Agriculture for the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 1961*, p. 43; Blumer, “Rattler Battler,” p. 15. South Dakota’s last official reptile control officer noted, “The venom of a young Prairie Rattlesnake may be up to three times the strength of the adult snake” (Steve W. Thompson, “Prairie Rattlesnake,” <http://www.sdsnake.com/Rat.htm>, accessed 13 Sept. 2013).

103. South Dakota, *Biennial Report of the South Dakota Department of Agriculture for the Period of July 1, 1962–June 30 1964*, p. 24, *Second Biennial Report of the South Dakota Department of Agriculture for the Period of July 1, 1964–June 30 1966*, pp. 27–28, *Third Biennial Report of the South Dakota Department of Agriculture for the Period of July 1, 1966–June 30 1968*, p. 33, *Fourth Biennial Report of the South Dakota Department of Agriculture for the Period of July 1, 1968–June 30 1970*, p. 31, *Annual Report of the Department of Agriculture Fiscal 1973*, p. 126.

Thompson used traps similar to those A. M. Jackley had perfected, the rattlesnake dimension of his job was much different from what had been the case thirty years earlier. Jackley had worked toward eradication, but as Rodger Pearson of the State Department of Agriculture said in 1975, “Thompson has concentrated on controlling snakes in more public areas and in teaching people how to control the reptiles themselves.”<sup>104</sup> Whatever the magnitude of past losses of livestock from snakebite, Thompson noted that in 1975 such losses were not a major problem. The state still had an abundance of rattlers, but as he said, “We don’t want to get rid of all of them, just the ones that could cause problems.” In an economy move, the South Dakota Legislature in 1977 ended funding for the reptile-abatement program, which was continued on an informal basis under the Department of Game, Fish and Parks. Thompson continued occasional snake hunting, mainly around Murdo, and gave talks on rattlesnakes.<sup>105</sup>

Jackley’s observations about rattlesnake distribution in South Dakota have stood the test of time well, with one possible exception. A frequent visitor to the Badlands, he stated that he had no knowledge of any person having been bitten by a rattlesnake while in the vegetation-free parts of that area. As he put it, “Such barren areas offer neither food nor shelter for rattlesnakes.”<sup>106</sup> Support for his contention came from B. H. Millard, who was also active in boosting the Badlands, but Millard said that he had encountered rattlesnakes on the grasslands adjoining the Badlands. However, a mid-twentieth-century Badlands National Monument guidebook, while stating that rattlers were “not abundant,” warned visitors about their presence. In 2002, a Badlands National Park official spoke of a greater presence, noting that in a ten-year period, two visitors were known to have been bitten by rattlesnakes.<sup>107</sup>

104. *Pierre Daily Capital Journal*, 2 Oct. 1975.

105. Interview with Steve Thompson, 16 Mar. 1999; telephone interview with Steve Thompson, Pierre, S.Dak., 16 Oct. 2013. See also Blumer, “Rattler Battler,” p. 15.

106. Unidentified newspaper clipping, headlined “Bad Lands Have No Rattlesnakes,” datelined Interior, S.Dak., 27 July [circa late 1930s], “Rattlesnakes” folder, SAC, SDSHS.

107. Swartzlow and Upton, *Badlands National Monument*, pp. 40–41. See also *Sioux Falls Argus-Leader*, 4 June 2002.

Six years after A. M. Jackley died, the University of California Press published Laurence M. Klauber's epic two-volume *Rattlesnakes: Their Habits, Life Histories, and Influence on Mankind*. In addition to his own research, Klauber made considerable use of reports from careful observers, and in his introduction he noted that Jackley was one of three persons whose information had been especially valuable. As Klauber later noted, "I corresponded with Mr. Jackley for some 15 years, and secured from him much interesting information on rattlesnakes and their habits that he had acquired while carrying out control measures." Klauber quoted or otherwise cited Jackley on an abundance of topics, such as snake dens, seasonal movement of prairie rattlers, their relationship to other snakes, reproduction, and the environmental challenges facing rattlesnakes in the northern plains, thereby making good use of the South Dakotan's observations.<sup>108</sup>

In the course of his work, Jackley paid particular attention to rattlesnakes' movement to and from their dens. Among his conclusions presented in Klauber's *Rattlesnakes* were that prairie rattlers might venture over two miles from their dens seeking food each summer, but the normal range was probably not over three-quarters of a mile. Jackley's emphasis upon the relationship of weather to human sightings of prairie rattlers and his judgment about the possible impact of crowding within dens upon the fate of these creatures exemplify his contributions to Klauber's work.<sup>109</sup> He also concluded that newborn rattlers usually select their own dens as opposed to going to the "regular dens." As he said, "It is my conclusion that the young take refuge for their first hibernation in whatever holes they can find."<sup>110</sup>

In writing about controlling rattlesnakes, Laurence Klauber gave significant attention to Jackley's methods of seasonal efforts to exter-

108. Klauber, *Rattlesnakes*, 2:991. See also *ibid.*, 1:10, 399, 542, 566, 572, 700. Like Jackley, Klauber was not formally trained as a herpetologist. For brief information on Klauber's career, see Laurence M. Klauber, "One Hundred Years Ago" [-] "Two Days in San Francisco-1906," preface by Molly McClain, pp. 2-4, <http://www.sandiegohistory.org/journal/v51-1pdf/2005-1earthquake.pdf>, accessed 2 Sept. 2013.

109. Klauber, *Rattlesnakes*, 1:555, 570.

110. *Ibid.*, 1:695.



minate rattlers “at their dens.” As Klauber said, “This method is possible only in the colder sections of the country where the rattlers are gregarious and the annual concentration draws individuals from considerable distances. This was the system employed by the late A. M. Jackley, rattlesnake-control officer of South Dakota, where probably the most successful rattlesnake control campaign ever instituted was carried on.” Klauber, however, added a footnote in which he declared, “I use the term ‘successful,’ which does not necessarily connote ‘desirable.’ Whether such wholesale destruction is to the best interest of the farmer or stock raiser only time will tell.”<sup>111</sup>

The establishment of Jackley’s state-sponsored program in 1937 reflected reality in most of the country west of the Missouri River. Distance and travel time have always been critical in plains life; the lack of readily accessible medical services exacerbated the rattlesnake hazard, particularly for children. Whatever one’s direct experience, fear of rattlesnakes was a major factor in favor of an abatement program. Hence, many South Dakotans praised Jackley’s work. His emphasis upon local people working together in rattlesnake control reflected a common-sense way to achieve the public good. For people with snake problems in his home state and elsewhere, his development of a practical snake trap was vital to his fight for a safer environment for humans and livestock.<sup>112</sup> In December 1948, less than fourteen months before Jackley’s death, a feature story in the *Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader* summarizing his work proclaimed that “South Dakota’s rattlesnake population is decreasing at the rate of approximately 20,000 to 25,000 a year.” Stressing Jackley’s focus upon eliminating rattlers at their dens, the article

111. Ibid., 2:975. See also the pages following for descriptions and illustrations of Jackley’s control work. H. K. Gloyd, in “The Problem of Too Many Snakes,” observed that Jackley advised persons trapping rattlesnakes to free any nonvenomous snakes captured. However, Gloyd said that “discrimination is hard to impress,” adding that “all of these snakes, including the rattlesnakes, constitute an important natural agency in the control of injurious rodents, such as ground-squirrels, prairie-dogs, and pocket gophers” (p. 95).

112. William R. Stickel, “Control of Snakes,” Wildlife Leaflet 345 (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Interior, Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife, 1953), pp. 6–8, “Rattlesnakes” folder, SAC, SDSHS.

noted that their reproductive rate and the survival challenges for newborn snakes precluded a quick recovery of rattler population in places where they had been “practically exterminated.”<sup>113</sup>

Although Jackley seems not to have contemplated a complete eradication of rattlesnakes, his efforts at wholesale extermination starkly contradict the more recent idea of a holistic natural environment. Urbanization in South Dakota in the decades after Jackley’s death perhaps fostered detachment from nature’s perils, be they blizzards, droughts, or rattlesnakes. Most certainly, the school consolidation that paralleled improved transportation and declining rural population reduced the rattlesnake threat to children.<sup>114</sup> Perhaps the efforts of Jackley and his successors to foster safety awareness contributed to a decline in snakebite episodes. Between 1940 and 1999, there were four snakebite fatalities in South Dakota.<sup>115</sup> From 2000 through 2009, a total of 138 persons were treated for snakebite in the state’s hospitals.<sup>116</sup>

113. *Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader*, 28 Dec. 1948.

114. Although the West River population rose from 157,496 in 1950 to 243,575 in 2010, ten of the twenty-two counties in the area had population declines over this period. Most of the West River country’s gain of 86,079 persons came from urban growth in Rapid City, Custer, Spearfish, Sturgis, and Belle Fourche, plus the reservation counties of Shannon and Todd. See county and city references in U.S., Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *1950 United States Census of Population: South Dakota: Number of Inhabitants* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1951), and *South Dakota: 2010 Population and Housing Counts* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2012); Gilbert C. Fite, “The Transformation of South Dakota Agriculture: The Effects of Farm Mechanization, 1939–1964,” *South Dakota History* 19 (Fall 1988): 298–99, 304, 305; Schell, *History of South Dakota*, pp. 334–35, 356–57.

115. Interview with Steve Thompson, 16 Mar. 1999. See also *Sioux Falls Argus-Leader*, 4 June 2002, in which reporter Jared Bies stated that “since 1940 there have been five confirmed deaths from snakebites.”

116. Lon Kightlinger, State Epidemiologist, South Dakota Department of Public Health, to Maggie Lindsey, Educational Services Coordinator, et al., email, 28 Dec. 2012. Dr. Kightlinger noted that the total of 138 snakebite cases in South Dakota hospitals for 2008–2009 does not include Indian Health Service or Department of Veterans Affairs institutions. He noted further that although the data does not specify rattlesnake bites per se, it was most unlikely that they came from another species. In the period 2000–2009, reported snakebite hospitalizations in South Dakota ranged from a minimum of six in 2004 to a maximum of twenty-two in 2008. Of the 138 total hospitalizations, 113 were South Dakota residents and 25 were nonresidents.

In his abatement crusade, A. M. Jackley was a man of his place and era. He saw rattlesnake hunting as both a sport and a public necessity, and he eagerly took his message across a vast geographic area. Yet, in his careful observation of a creature that shared his homeland, he was more than simply a militant foe. His years of study of prairie rattlesnakes contributed to knowledge about their way of life on the Northern Great Plains.

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*On the covers:* Lyle R. Johnson (front) grew up on a farm near Lake Thompson in Kingsbury County (back, bottom) during the 1930s. In this issue, he provides a year-by-year account of the decade of drought and its effects. Harl A. Dalstrom delves into the life and career of A. M. Jackley (back, top), sometimes called the Saint Patrick of South Dakota for his work to eliminate the rattlesnakes that posed a threat to the state's West River residents.

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