

IOWA HISTORY



Courtesy Library of Congress
Most Iowa deer roamed freely in 1909

Only Deer Farm in the West

In the late 1860s a man named John W. Griggs came to Iowa to trap and hunt. But after a while he decided to make his living as a farmer. In some ways he was a typical Iowa farmer. But in 1909 a New York City newspaper described Griggs' Iowa operation as the “only deer farm run for profit.”

Griggs' farm, located about 20 miles southwest of Mason City on the border between Hancock and Cerro Gordo counties, was home for a herd of about 100 deer. He had been experimenting with different breeds for about 15 years. Beginning with a pair of Virginia deer, Griggs had studied the habits and traits of different varieties, including Columbia blacktails, as well as animals from Minnesota and Wisconsin. He found that through careful selection of does and bucks caught at a young age in the woods of northern Wisconsin and Minnesota, he was able to build a strong herd. According to newspaper accounts published across the country, Griggs paid as much attention to breeding deer as most Iowa farmers did their horses.

Griggs claimed his deer were prolific breeders, with fawns born in May and June. His younger does produced single births, but older does often had twins. His herd of 30 does had produced 50 fawns in 1909.

Deer required minimal care, according to Griggs. He used 8-foot tall “woven wire fencing” with posts set close to each other for sturdiness. He said secure fencing was important because a frightened deer would charge a fence “at breakneck speed.”

His deer ate tender plants, shoots, leaves, fruit and berries found in woodlands. They didn't eat ordinary grass, but considered clover and alfalfa delicacies. And he also fed the herd corn. He said the deer lost their appetites in the winter so ate very little. While he provided plenty

of water for them in the summer, in the winter they consumed snow. Griggs noted that his deer refused to enter sheds, so he made sure they had groves of trees for protection.

Griggs' bucks weighed 150 to 360 pounds, the does 120 to 175 pounds. Fawns at 6 months of age weighed 70 to 90 pounds, and at 18 months they weighed in at 120 to 170. He said there was good profit to be made in raising deer, as the demand for venison was increasing. Not only that, parks were always looking for deer and were willing to pay \$20 to \$30 for Griggs' animals. And a buck with a "nice pair of antlers" brought an extra \$5. He admitted transporting deer was a challenge as they were so timid and active. It was common for the animals to injure themselves during transport.

Griggs said he had turned to raising deer in his later years of farming because he wanted to ease up a bit. He loved all animals, but he looked to his deer herd for "company and inspiration."

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