

# IOWA HISTORY



Courtesy Library Congress

In the early 1900s a man could make a living as a rat catcher

## Iowa's Most Wanted List

The rat, mice, and ground squirrel populations of Iowa were about to be drastically reduced if the state department of health commissioner had his way. In December 1911 Dr. Guilford Sumner issued a statement that was circulated throughout the state. He wanted to exterminate every rodent that potentially carried the bubonic plague, cholera or leprosy.

It all stemmed from a letter he had received from his counterpart in California stating that diseased rats carried onboard freight ships from the Orient had escaped into the state's port cities. Health officials feared an epidemic of the diseases in the United States and had notified every state government about the concerns.

At the time people had various beliefs about the way diseases were transmitted. They varied from "mysterious conditions of the atmosphere or soil" to a "visitation of the wrath of the Almighty." Doctors were beginning to conduct research to dispel those myths. And some believed rodents and insects played a role in the problem.

A surgeon in Oakland, California, had made a study of leprosy in the rats of Oakland and found “very recent” cases of the disease among the rodents. He reported the sighting of a large rat staggering about the streets of Berkeley in “broad daylight” as an illustration of the seriousness of the situation in California.

Iowa’s department of health was taking no chances. Dr. Sumner warned Iowans that the diseased creatures may “invade our state at any time from the Pacific Coast.” He feared that they could easily be brought into Iowa on freight shipments of fruit and other food products.

Iowans were encouraged to begin immediate “extermination of all rats, mice and ground squirrels as much as possible.” The state’s citizens were reminded that these rodents would seek refuge in cellars and homes. And this would increase the possibility of contact with humans.

In the past people killed the pests and tossed the carcasses into the streets and alleys of cities and towns. Dr. Sumner wanted that to change. He advised burning the dead bodies with kerosene so cats and dogs, which often came in contact with kids, were prevented from eating them. He cautioned it was important to begin these practices “at once” to halt the spread of the plague, leprosy and cholera in the state of Iowa.

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Source

“Death For Rodents,” *Times Republican*, Dec 5, 1911.