

# IOWA HISTORY



*Photo Courtesy Library of Congress*  
Muskrat house

## Prairie Sloughs: Headaches for Humans, Havens for Wildlife

It was rumored that a wagon and team of oxen had disappeared from sight as its driver attempted to cross Purgatory Slough. They were never seen again. And everybody knew the story about the rusty gun barrel and human skeleton that had been discovered in Hell Slough. Both sloughs were located in Calhoun County, but travelers in most parts of the state faced the dangers of the wet, marshy swamps that mired down wagons and caused headaches for human.

In the early and mid-1800s it wasn't unusual for stage coach companies to replace their coaches for a common lumber wagon in order to successfully traverse the frequent sloughs that covered the prairie. When a coach or wagon got stuck in the sloughs, one end of a strong rope was attached to the tongue of the vehicle and the other to a team located on solid ground. Then the pulling began. It helped if a strong human could pry the buried wheels up with a sturdy board. Stage passengers were encouraged to carry a fence rail with their luggage in case they had to help pry the stage out of the muck.

L.S. Coffin's family of Fort Dodge was traveling by wagon near Stratford in Hamilton County in the spring of 1854 when they became stuck. The team could not move. Mr. Coffin started out on foot to find help. Within a couple of miles he came upon a man with a yoke of oxen who was happy to assist. After a little work, the wagon was freed. Mr. Coffin tried to pay the fellow \$5 for his trouble, but he refused to accept the money. The Coffins happened to have a bottle of whiskey in their wagon (which they had brought along in case of snake bites) and

offered the man a drink, but he again refused. The Coffin family thanked the man, and everyone went on their way across the prairie.

In winter the sloughs were frozen solid. Cold and “dead as icebergs.” Muskrat houses could be seen scattered over the surfaces. In summer the sloughs were alive with wildlife: mollusks, yellow-headed blackbirds, purple grackles, red-winged blackbirds, marsh wrens, minks, cranes, geese and dragon flies.

The dark green grass (“black grass”) that grew in the sloughs offered cover for ducks. And the celery settlers planted to attract the birds encouraged the fowl to stick around for a while. Duck hunting season was closed from April 15 through September 1, but during the rest of the year hunters were known to get 40 to 60 birds in a three-hour span in the sloughs.

By 1899 many of the sloughs had disappeared. A newspaper editor wrote they were as “rare as deer and buffalo.” He blamed drainage practices and “changes in climate” for the situation. Cultivated fields replaced lakes and ponds. He claimed many species of animals and birds that had dwelt in the sloughs had become extinct.

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