

## Chicken Thieves in Earlier Green County

As those of us living in this area are well aware, the county is best known for the delicious, quality cheese that it has produced for generations. The cheese could not have been produced without the many dairy farmers throughout the county. Unlike today, many of those farms used to consist of only 80 or 120 acres. In addition to the cows, many farmers also raised hogs for additional income. The hogs would consume the whey, which was a byproduct from the production of cheese. Many of the farm wives would raise chickens to earn some extra money by selling the eggs, or even the chickens, when they came to town. Chickens will be the focus of this column.

The first article comes from the March 25, 1901 issue of the Monroe Evening Times and happened when a farmer brought live chickens to town, possibly to sell to one of the meat markets. The “flock of chickens” got away from him on the east side of the square that afternoon. He spent a long time rounding them up and getting them back in the coop. This creates a mental image in my mind. I’m guessing that the article would have been much longer if the chickens had invaded any of the downtown businesses.



Many farm wives in the earlier days of Green County raised chickens on the side, which opened the door for chicken thieves throughout the county.

I have seen many articles about chicken thieves in various parts of the county as I read the old newspapers. Some of the thieves didn’t use much common sense to keep from getting caught. Julius Lewer of Brooklyn pleaded not guilty to Justice Saucerman on a charge of stealing chickens as described on December 9, 1910. Thieves had entered Earl Phinney’s chicken house in Brooklyn and taken seven of his eight chickens from it. The poultry was killed before leaving the premises. The trail of blood led across fields directly to the Lewer home west of the village. Mar-

shall Clint Sholts, accompanied by Alfred Winter and James Flint, followed the tracks and saw and heard enough while in hiding on the Lewer place to warrant Lewer's arrest.

One of the most clever professional thieves that ever operated in the area was arrested the following year on Thursday, October 5 by Chief Blunt after the "roost prowler" made a haul of 35 choice, fat fowl the previous evening. The man, who was about 40, gave his name as Ed Payne, but refused to tell where he was from.

Payne had been robbing farmers of their chickens around Monroe for five weeks. He came here with a horse and buggy that he had been keeping in Martin Blotz's barn on what is now 16th Avenue. He had been making excursions into the country one or two nights a week and disposing of the looted property to the local meat markets.

Four farmers northwest of Monroe had lost several chickens on the previous Wednesday night. It was learned that Payne had disposed of about 40 head on Thursday morning. It was estimated that Payne had made way with between \$100 and \$150 worth of chickens. John O'Connor and Thomas Connors, who both lived north of the city, said that they had each lost a number of chickens in the previous two weeks.

Payne had stayed off the streets during the daytime, keeping his operations unknown. Blunt got a clue and watched the thief leave town at 5:00 Wednesday evening. After Payne's trip to the country, he would sleep in the barn where he kept his horse. He had a large box on the rear end of his buggy into which he placed his loot. Strings with which he tied the legs of the chickens' feet were also found with his belongings.

Payne told one of the local meat dealers that he was a brother of Illinois Central Railroad agent F. E. Lambole. He claimed to have a chicken ranch near Freeport, but brought his fowl here as he could get a better price for them. Chief Blunt asked that all farmers north of Monroe who had been losing chickens in the previous week notify him immediately.

The thief appeared in court on Friday afternoon and was fined \$10 and costs. The fine was light because it would be hard to prove the identity of the stolen property if the case went to trial. The court also took into consideration that the man had a wife and six children who would be punished if a heavier fine or jail sentence were imposed. It was also found out that the man's real identity was Edward Page of Janesville.

Page did not eat even one bite of food while in jail because he was distracted by worry about his predicament. It was discovered that he had relatives in Monroe who refused to help him. They had not been aware of his predicament until he sent for them to visit him at the jail. He ended up paying his fine and leaving for Janesville on Friday.

This was not the end of chicken thieves in Green County as we will learn more next week about the continuing thefts and how much more bold some of the thieves were.