Throughout the late 1800s, grasshoppers brought destruction and ruin to pioneers across America’s West.

By Lauren Tarshis

The disaster began as a shadow in the distance, a strange shimmer in the sky on a hot summer afternoon in 1875. Eight-year-old Laura Ingalls had no idea what it could be, but in her gut, she knew something terrible was about to happen.

Laura and her family lived on a small farm in western Minnesota. From their one-room house, they could see nothing but miles of flat land covered with tall, waving grass. This region, wide-open and mostly wild, was still a new part of America; Minnesota had become the 32nd state less than 20 years earlier, in 1858.

The Ingallses were among the first of many settlers who came to this enormous prairie from all over the United States and Europe. The newcomers arrived with high hopes of establishing prosperous farms. Few understood the grim realities of pioneer life—that the work would be endless, the dangers everpresent.
Each day, the Ingalls family rose at dawn to care for their cows, horses, and chickens. Laura’s mother cooked, scrubbed, and sewed; Laura’s father worked in the wheat fields until after the sun had set. Calluses from hauling buckets of water and raking hay covered Laura’s hands. And the family contended with constant threats: deadly fevers, lightning strikes, rattlesnakes, blackout blizzards, wildfires that sent waves of flame racing across the grass.

And now, this strange, shimmering cloud looming closer and closer.

Whir, Click, Buzz

The cloud extended as far as anyone could see. For miles around the Ingalls farm, people stopped what they were doing to stare up at the sky. Farmers dropped their pitchforks, women turned from their stoves, children abandoned their chores.

What was this cloud?

It didn’t have the dark-gray puffiness of a thundercloud. It wasn’t funnel-shaped like a tornado. And its edges . . . sparkled.

As the cloud came closer, it blocked out the sun and the day turned dark. Eerie sounds echoed through the air.

Whirrrrrrrrr. Click, click, click. Buzzzzzzzz. It sounded like thousands of giant scissors snipping away at the sky.

Laura stood with her family as the cloud filled the sky. It was an attack of insects. It was an attack of bugs.

Laura stared in surprise. It was a grasshopper—greenish brown, about an inch long, with spindly legs and gigantic bulging eyes. Thud, thud, thud, thud.

More grasshoppers fell to the ground. Others hit Laura’s head. Had these grasshoppers somehow been swept into that dark cloud?

No. The grasshoppers were not in the cloud. The grasshoppers were the cloud. That enormous stretch of blackness comprised millions of grasshoppers—grasshoppers that were now swooping down onto the farm.

What made locusts so devastating was that they ate the crops that people needed to survive. They moved down fields of wheat, corn, and other grains. They also devoured vegetables sprouting in gardens, fruit budding on trees, and berries ripening on bushes.

The locusts also devoured the vegetables in the family’s garden—vegetables that Laura’s mother had been planning to pack away in jars for the winter. Laura’s mother had tried to save the cucumbers and pumpkins and beans by covering the plants with quilts, but the bugs chewed right through the fabric.

With their crops destroyed and no vegetables to eat, the Ingalls family—along with thousands of others throughout the region—faced starvation and ruin.

Winged Attackers

Locusts have been menacing humans for thousands of years and have darkened the skies of every continent but Antarctica. They appear throughout the Bible. Their bulging eyes stare out of ancient Egyptian carvings. In North America, ravenous swarms were terrorizing farmers from coast to coast as far back as the early 1700s. But the attacks on the prairie in the late 1800s were different. The insects gathered in swarms that were truly monstrous in size. The largest swarm ever recorded was an estimated 110 miles wide and 1,800 miles long—as long as the entire east coast of the United States.

Swarms appeared on and off for decades, though the worst attacks happened in the 1870s. Those years were
Many pioneers on the prairie lived in “sod houses” made of bricks of dirt and grass.

Unusually dry on the prairie, and Rocky Mountain locusts thrived in drought conditions. In many places—including the part of western Minnesota where the Ingalls family lived—locusts didn’t fly away when they finished eating; they laid eggs, creating new armies of winged attackers that struck the same areas again and again. The horror continued even after the locusts died. Dead locusts filled up wells and ponds, making the water too foul to drink. Their carcasses blanketed the ground and rotted away, emitting a stomach-turning stench that lingered for weeks.

Newspapers told stories of starving families and decimated towns. People in eastern states donated money and clothing to “grasshopper victims.” State governments also gave money to those affected by the locust swarms. The Ingalls family received some of this money; but it was not nearly enough. And so, after losing their wheat crop two summers in a row, the Ingalls family gave up on their farm in Minnesota and relocated to Iowa.

Fading From Memory

In the late 1890s, the grasshopper attacks stopped. The last Rocky Mountain locust was spotted in 1902, in Canada. They are now extinct. How did such massive swarms simply vanish? Scientists believe humans killed off the Rocky Mountain locust—by accident. Between droughts, the locusts would migrate back to their original home, a small area in the Rocky Mountains. When settlers arrived there in the late 1800s, they tore up grass to plant crops and they imported cattle, which munched on plants and trampled the soil. The humans and their cattle altered the natural environment where locusts had thrived for centuries. It turned out that these mighty swarms were actually fragile, and it took only a few years for the Rocky Mountain locust to disappear.

Other locust species continue to swarm around the world, and hungry grasshoppers still plague many Western states. But the grasshoppers in America today are not as enormous or destructive as the locusts that darkened the prairie skies 140 years ago.

Somehow those swarms of the 1800s have faded from memory. Today, many Americans don’t know that locust attacks were a significant part of pioneer life. Many who do know about the attacks learned about them by reading On the Banks of Plum Creek. The book, part of the famous Little House series, is fiction, but it is based on the author’s experiences growing up as a pioneer on America’s prairie.

That author is Laura Ingalls Wilder, the same little girl who watched the locusts lay siege to her home that awful day in 1875.

Growing Up on a Farm

Ryder Staples, 14, says living on a farm is hard work—and he loves it.

By Ryder Staples, as told to Jessica Press

Farming in America is quite different today than it was 150 years ago. High-tech computers help today’s farmers do their work more precisely and quickly. There are also far fewer farmers. In 1870, farmers made up 53 percent of the U.S. labor force. Now they make up only 1.5 percent.

For everything that has changed about farming, one thing has not: Farming is hard. The hours are long (18-hour workdays are not uncommon), the work is physically demanding, and the surprises from nature can be uncontrollable and devastating. One strong hailstorm can decimate an entire crop in minutes. Weeds, fungi, and bacteria can destroy crops. Pests like beetles, stinkbugs, and crickets can munch their way through acres of plantings. And during a drought year, a farmer may make little or no money.

But in spite of the challenges, farming can be rewarding. For a closer look at farming today, Scope spoke with eighth-grader Ryder Staples, who lives on a corn and soybean farm in Douglas County, Minnesota.

Here’s what he had to say:

“Our family’s farm is such a big part of my life. I’m used to the sweet smell of corn that fills the air over our hilly fields. One of my earliest memories was when I was about 6 and I got to ride with my dad on the combine—a truck-like machine that harvests our corn and soybeans.

During the summer when school is out, I work on the farm from about 8 in the morning until the sun goes down. My job is to pick rocks from the fields. If a rock gets stuck in the machinery, it can slow down planting and harvesting; bigger rocks can even prevent crops from growing in the soil. My day may sound long, but think about this: During planting season, which starts in late April, my dad and uncles start working at 6 in the morning and stay in the field until midnight.

In May, June, and July, after planting season has ended, my dad and uncles focus on spraying herbicides to keep weeds from growing. My two
older brothers are starting to help out with that work. (The three of us hope to run the farm after college.)

The corn harvest starts in late August. I look forward to the first taste of creamy, crunchy sweet corn every summer. I also like that time of year because I get to take some of our corn into town to sell.

Back in the 1800s, many of the crops grown in this country were used to feed farm animals, and that’s still pretty much true today. Most of our field corn is used for animal feed; it gets shipped by train all across the country. As for our sweet corn, we sell it locally or eat it at home. During the summer, my family eats sweet corn every night.

Planning and Math

There is so much planning and math that goes into farming. My dad and uncles use computerized mapping tools to determine exactly how much can grow on certain parts of the farm and how much—or how little—herbicide needs to be sprayed. But some things are out of our control. Crazy hailstorms and windstorms have taken out some of our fields. Thankfully, we haven’t lost too much money from that damage. But think about all the hard work we put into those crops, only to see them ruined by one storm. There are also animals, like raccoons, that try to eat the sweet corn. (I don’t blame them; it’s delicious.) To keep them out, we use electric fences and play the radio to make them think humans are nearby.

The Hard Work We Do

Farming makes up a huge part of who I am, but in a lot of ways, I’m just like any other teenager. I play on my school’s basketball, football, and baseball teams, I ride bikes with my best friend, my favorite books are Harry Potter, and I go to church with my family.

My town is small; there is no Target or Walmart or McDonald’s. My school is 20 miles away, and my neighbor, who is also my best friend, lives 3 miles away.

Growing up on a farm has taught me a lot. My parents, who both grew up on farms too, can be strict, but I know that’s because there are certain values they want us to have. They want us to work together as a family, they want us to be kind, and they want us to be humble. And the hard work we do—together—has instilled all of that in me, forever.”

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