

# Back in the day

## A man of his time

Dorothy Kruse

George Ruegger's education came from the school he found at his back door.

*Things That Happen in 50 years – I Geo. Ruegger, Boren year of 1881 January 26th, at Hiqland, Illinois...*

These were the opening words of an autobiography by 50-year-old George Ruegger.

*Father was a Butcher, We Moved to Dietrich, Illinois, on a Farm 1887. I went To A Contry school until I was 12 years old, graduated When I Finished the 4 Reader Then I got My First job-Herding cattle on Wild Prary-Land 1 cent a day for Each Head of stock, Which Was from 35 to 65 Head for The summer months. Had a good Poney and a good Dog, to Help.*

George was writing about “unbroken prairie” in Illinois where he lived with his family and eventually met his wife, Isadora Huddleston. In 1906, George bought a home seeker’s railroad ticket for 30 days to visit Isadora’s brother in Radisson, Wisconsin. About that visit he wrote, “I liked this contry of woods Menny Logging camps — going west and North.” George and Isadora never used the return ticket.

Unfortunately, this ended George’s diary, but his story was far from over. His life became the focus of articles written by Mel Ellis, Ernie Swift and Gordon MacQuarrie. Part of George’s claim to fame would evoke protests today, but in the 1890s there was an abundance of game with few regulations. He was a masterful trapper and because of his reputation, was contracted by the state to trap animals — fox, beaver and bear — considered bothersome at the time.

As a state trapper, George was called upon when farmers lost livestock to black bears or when beavers built homes in creeks and streams, causing them to flood. An article in The Milwaukee Journal gave this account:

“Ruegger is a weather-bitten little man who smokes a short black pipe which he fills from a buckskin pouch. Many sportsmen and naturalists know him as a sportsman, but few know him as a professional trapper, which has put him on the spot



George Ruegger was a weather-bitten, woods-smart man whose records of 30 years of trapping were a reservoir of early wildlife management data.

many times when local trappers have failed to erase a sheep-killing bear, or when, ‘nobody can get them beaver out’n there.’”

He’d arrive in a worn, high-wheeled truck with knobby rear tires for getting over bad roads and interview the complaining farmer, giving no hint that he was a guy who felt he had to make good. He didn’t dare miss because, “If I did, pretty soon they’d get another man to do the job.”

George Ruegger loved the north country. He was “woods-smart” far beyond school learning. As one writer put it, “What he did was simply attend the school he found at his back door.”

He walked 125 to 150 miles per week, often on snowshoes, rather than setting up camp, because he didn’t feel right being away from Isadora and their eight children.

George kept records for almost 30 years of animals trapped, the date, who commissioned it and damage the animals caused. Gordon MacQuarrie said of George’s records:

*“Those records with Ruegger’s splendid story of wildlife knowledge are a reservoir of wildlife management facts for this area. He*

*is such a rare treasure that the Conservation Department has had his trap line history analyzed and graphed as a valuable field guide to typical wildlife transition of Wisconsin’s north. In spite of his accomplishments there is no more pretense or sham in Ruegger than a stand of giant hemlocks.”*

It is not unusual for people of humble existence to seek out men of fame and fortune, but in George Ruegger’s case, the tables were turned.

Ernest Swift wrote, “I would not trade three days of grouse hunting with George, for a whole winter in Florida. Ruegger gives dignity to hunting. His code of ethics is one of the strictest I have ever seen.”

Mel Ellis once wrote, “Nothing escaped Ruegger’s attention in the woods. A feather, bent bracken, turned stone, broken spider web...were all words in the story of what had transpired on the earth along which he walked.”

George Ruegger was as much a part of Wisconsin’s Northwoods as a white-tailed deer, tall sugar maple or wood violet and worthy of his own chapter in Wisconsin’s history.

Dorothy Kruse writes from Oregon, Wisconsin. Her husband’s uncle, Sam, was one of George Ruegger’s eight children.