

A Pig Tale

Before civilization drove out — and good fences kept in — the various fauna in our neck of the woods, the Village of Eau Claire City was a stopping place for many unwelcome animals, including runaway horses, herds of cattle, black bears, at least eighteen wildcats, and a pack of timber wolves — not to mention the occasional goat or flock of chickens.

None of these animals, however, caused the village residents more chagrin than the swine that overran the city for decades, from its earliest days onward.

As early as 1859, pigs were ruling the streets. Gilbert Porter, editor of the *Eau Claire Free Press*, even reported watching a sow steal a sack of flour from a wagon and bring it back to her “large litter.”

That summer, the town board held a meeting and drafted an ordinance, “the effect of which was to deprive hogs from running at large,” according to the *Free Press*. It was the first of many such meetings, the first of many such ordinances. But, Porter opined, “Judging from the great number [of swine] which daily throng our streets, one would think a law had been passed compelling owners to turn them all into the streets. Scarcely a day

passes in which some depredation is not committed by these unmolested street nuisances. This is not as it should be, and our authorities, if we have any, ought to prevent these depredations by impounding every hog that is allowed to run in the streets.” His was a good plan. Unfortunately it wouldn’t be adopted for a decade.

Whatever satisfaction the town meeting and ordinance gave the human folk, it had no effect on



South Barstow Street looks peaceful in this 1859 illustration. But at the time, Eau Claire’s streets were often teeming with hogs on the loose.

the hogs, who were on the streets in force all summer and dutifully returned the next spring. Noted the *Free Press* in May 1860, “There is more live pork running at large in our town than in any other its size we know of, at the same time there is a law which positively interdicts the peregrination of all four-footed swine, and we should be glad to see it enforced. The slightest inattention to the shutting of door-yard gates insures the presence of half a score of these annoying grunters who always seem to be laboring under the impression that it is necessary to ‘root hog or die’. We go in for changing the language of the song: ‘root hog and die’.”

Whether or not the perception was correct, the Village of Eau Claire City felt itself to be alone in this pig predicament. The *Free Press* lamented in August 1860 that “this is the only locality where the hog law is not put in force.” Neither North Eau Claire nor West Eau Claire, which were separate entities until 1872, crowed about it. The West Eau Claire *Argus* made no mention of any worries across the Chippewa.

So it went, year after year: the press called for action, the laissez-faire town board didn’t act, the pigs ran riot. The *Free Press* got into the habit of running a shaming editorial periodically (from one: “We don’t like to be captious, but really we think it a shame to our town that swine are permitted to run at large...”).

By May 1867, notice was given in the paper that loose pigs were subject to impounding, but it wasn’t until six weeks later that the pigs made their fatal error: they attacked *Free Press* editor Porter’s own personal garden. “It is extremely annoying,” he wrote, “to awake some ‘bright sunny morn’ and find a drove of sleepy swine occupying one’s shed and out-buildings after having rooted up and destroyed his garden.”

Whether or not it was the power of the press, the next Tuesday a special town meeting was held to take measures against the “intolerable nuisance.” At one p.m. the meeting was called to order at Reed’s Hall, and from that room that afternoon came a law with some tusks.

On the Cover: *Grand Avenue, Eau Claire, 1945. Photo by Warren Brunner. Brunner was a photographer for the Eau Claire Leader from 1944 to 1946. He lives in Berea, Ky., where he has operated Brunner Studio for more than 40 years.*

“It is hereby resolved and ordered by the qualified electors of the Town of Eau Claire, that all Swine be, and the same are, restricted from going at large on highways in said Town, during all times of the year, and that the owners of any Swine who shall permit or allow any such swine to go at large ... shall forfeit and pay for every such offense a fine of ten dollars (\$10).”

The next section of the law prohibited cattle and horses from going at large in town — but only from November 15 to March 15, and carrying a fine of only \$5. It seems fair to say the law was prejudiced against the hog.

The pesky porcines seemed to disappear from the news for a good three years after that, until the summer of 1870. That year an ordinance established a regular pound for all loose animals. Dave Wyman was appointed Pound Master. Warned the *Free Press*, “Our citizens should see that their horses and swine are properly stabled and penned, for if allowed to run at large they will certainly be taken care of by ‘Uncle Dave’ and ten dollars a ticket of squigulum be exacted by him for their release in every instance. So look out.”

By 1889, the three villages had long since incorporated as one city, and a revised set of ordinances governed it. The whole of Chapter VIII was devoted to “Restraining and regulating certain animals running at large.”

Under the ordinance, which ran more than five pages, anyone (supposing he or she was able) could drive, lead, drag or cajole a loose farm animal to the pound where it would wait to be claimed — or sold by the city after due notice was given.

One of the ordinance’s quaintest touches was in spelling out that, should the “owner, lessee or person having charge of such animal be known to the pound keeper, said pound keeper shall give notice to such person, personally, or by leaving the same at his usual place of abode with some person of suitable age or discretion.”

While it might seem quaint now, this was a serious law — even harsh in some ways. Fines ranged up to \$50, a whopping sum at the time; officials were granted much latitude in enforcing the ordinance (including killing certain animals); and if a defendant convicted of violating any of the sixteen sections of the chapter refused to pay his fine, he could be imprisoned for not more than three months, or, at the discretion of the court, be kept for that duration “at hard labor for the benefit of the city of Eau Claire....”

It was a law meant to put an end, once and for all, to the filthy and treacherous conditions of the streets at the time.

What little is left of the law reads, in its entirety, “The keeping of swine of any size within the city is forbidden, except in the outlying districts which are essentially rural, and in such districts the same shall be kept in barns or structures not less than two hundred feet distant from any neighbor’s dwelling or store.”

While even that sentence hardly seems necessary these days, in fact it was the subject of a small controversy a few years ago, involving a pot-bellied pig as a pet. A *pet*? Those street nuisances, those annoying grunTERS? Villagers in 19th-century Eau Claire could not have imagined it.