Introduction:
In response to an inquiry I made in the Harrison County genealogy page asking for historic records of rattlesnakes, I received the following (posted to the board on Aug. 11, 2002) from someone (name in my correspondence) who was reading old newspapers on microfilm at the Iowa City Branch library of the State Historical Society. He said:
“Today I was reading the Dunlap Reporter in the years 1887-1890 and recall seeing 2 articles on residents being bitten by rattlesnakes-one was fatal. If my memory serves, the fatal one was Jemima Bonar [JFM] -a mature woman. The other was a child being bitten in the foot while playing in the family yard. I didn't read them closer as I was scanning quickly for family.” See below for transcription of account.

It is interesting to note that Dunlop is along the Boyer River. A number of rattlesnakes were also reported in early settler days from Kiron (report 72) along Otter creek, which drains into the Boyer River about 20 miles upstream.

There is not yet enough information to know what type of rattlesnake these were, but the ones in Kiron were in habitat suggestive of massasauga.

This should be a fairly good account since it was in a newspaper and the lady died. However, for now I will give it a 6 and probably increase the rating to a 6.5 when and if I read the microfilm myself.

August 9, 2004 Fred sent me a copy of the page with her death. It was the 5th of July 18[8]8. She was 50 years old. She had been bitten a week before her death, but then fell violently ill, went into a stupor and died.

June 18, 2007 Since I have now read the original, I will make this 6.5. I don’t know why I did not find this in the Harrison County death records, but someone told me that they did not always list the deaths early on. However, I should go back sometime and see what she is listed as dying from.

Account: Here is the transcription of the account.

Death of Mrs. Bonar.
Dunlap Reporter
July 5, 1888
P.5 XVIII Number 10
Mrs. Jemina Bonar died in this city Saturday, June 30, 1888, at the age of 50 years, 9 months and 24 days. The circumstances connected with her unexpected death are sad in the extreme. This Saturday previous to her death she was bitten by a rattlesnake while gathering strawberries. The prompt application of restoratives and emetics indicated that she was progressing nicely, but on the morning of her death she was taken violently ill, falling into a stupor about 2 a.m. from which she never awoke. She was married to Jesse Bonar January 18, 1857, at Green Center, Noble county, Ind., and was the mother of ten children, nine of whom survive her, together with her husband. She moved to Winnebago County, Ia., in 1862, and to Dunlap in 1877. The funeral was conducted by Rev. Thos. Reese, at the family residence, assisted by Rev. Barton of this city, a large cortege following her remains to their final resting place in the city of the dead. The relatives of the deceased desire us to express their sincere thanks to their many kind friends and neighbors for favors rendered during their bereavement.

Transcribed from the original by Shawna Van Wyhe, a Dordt student.

Analysis

I wonder if the information on the bite does not suggest a massasauga. While they are usually not fatal to an adult, some fatalities can occur and I suspect the progression to death would be quicker with a prairie or Timber.

I just checked with the Iowa geological survey and best available data indicates that there are no bedrock exposures in the township that Dunlap is located. In fact the nearest exposures are 10 miles away in the south of the township to the southwest (and these may not be limestone exposures). This would support eliminating a timber rattlesnake as the snake that killed Mrs. Bonar.