

Common toad a frequent resident in back yards

ART BRIGGS-JUDE
Correspondent

There are many reasons why the common toad is among the first forms of wildlife that most children become aware of.

A frequent resident of both rural and urban backyards and gardens, its discovery is bound to attract attention. Often this occurs when the child is retrieving a ball from beneath some hedgerow shrubbery or when helping a parent with some activity in the garden.

What they find there is a squat, short-legged creature with bulging eyes, a big mouth, and a bump-covered skin, not unlike some of the comic characters they've become accustomed to on television shows.

What they do then is try and pick up this slow-moving amphibian, much to the chagrin of their elders.

Knowing there is the chance of a toxic excretion when toads are handled in a rough manner, people quickly caution the child to release the creature on the spot.

However, instead of telling kids the real reason for not touching the toad, they usually come up with the long-standing myth about the warts they will get from handling it.

This old throwback to a day when all animals and plants were either good or bad has probably caused a lot of these beneficial toads their early demise.

Actually the American toad, with which we are all familiar, is a very important and interesting part of our native fauna. Beginning their life in a string of gelatinous eggs in the shallows of a pond or the backwaters of a lake or river, the black tadpoles may emerge as early as three days after the egg-laying.

Two months later these pollywogs, as they are commonly called, transform into tiny toads a quarter of an inch long. Leaving the water at that time they will not return until they have reached maturity two years from then.

Ironically, very few of these young toads reach maturity, let alone their life expectancy of about eight

years. Garter snakes and water snakes, being immune to the toad's poison, readily devour them whole, while some predatory birds and animals are able to eat the flesh and leave the toxic skin untouched.

Oddly enough, toads eat their own skins which they shed in the same manner as snakes during their development.

The common toad possesses all of the necessary equipment for a life that takes place predominantly on land. Its compact shape, short legs and thick skin help it to reduce water loss during spells of hot, dry weather.

Their oversized bladder also acts as a water storage organ to carry them through periods of drought.

Toads have projections on their hind feet, called metatarsal tubercles, that allow them to dig backwards into the ground. Thus, we sometimes see a toad with only the top of its head showing, or accidentally discover one while spading up a flower bed.

These excavating aids on the feet of toads are also important in their self-preservation, for unlike frogs that hibernate below the ice level in the mud pond, toads must dig down deep into the soil to escape freezing.

Legion are the stories old gardeners tell of the pet toad that took up residence under the base of the birdbath, a rock garden crevice, or the lower step of the back porch.

Often these rough-skinned night hunters would be given special names like Moses, Bulgy, or Gramps, and become so trusting as to let themselves be tickled under the chin or rubbed gently on the head.

The fact that these toads were a constant ally in the garden made their presence all the more worthwhile.

The truth is, as destroyers of June bugs, moths and slugs, toads have no equal and several of these slick-tongued jumpers in your backyard are of more value than pesticides for this purpose. Matter of fact, when it comes to infestations of earwigs, the common toad could well be your ace in the hole.

The toad possesses all the necessary equipment for a life that takes place predominantly on land



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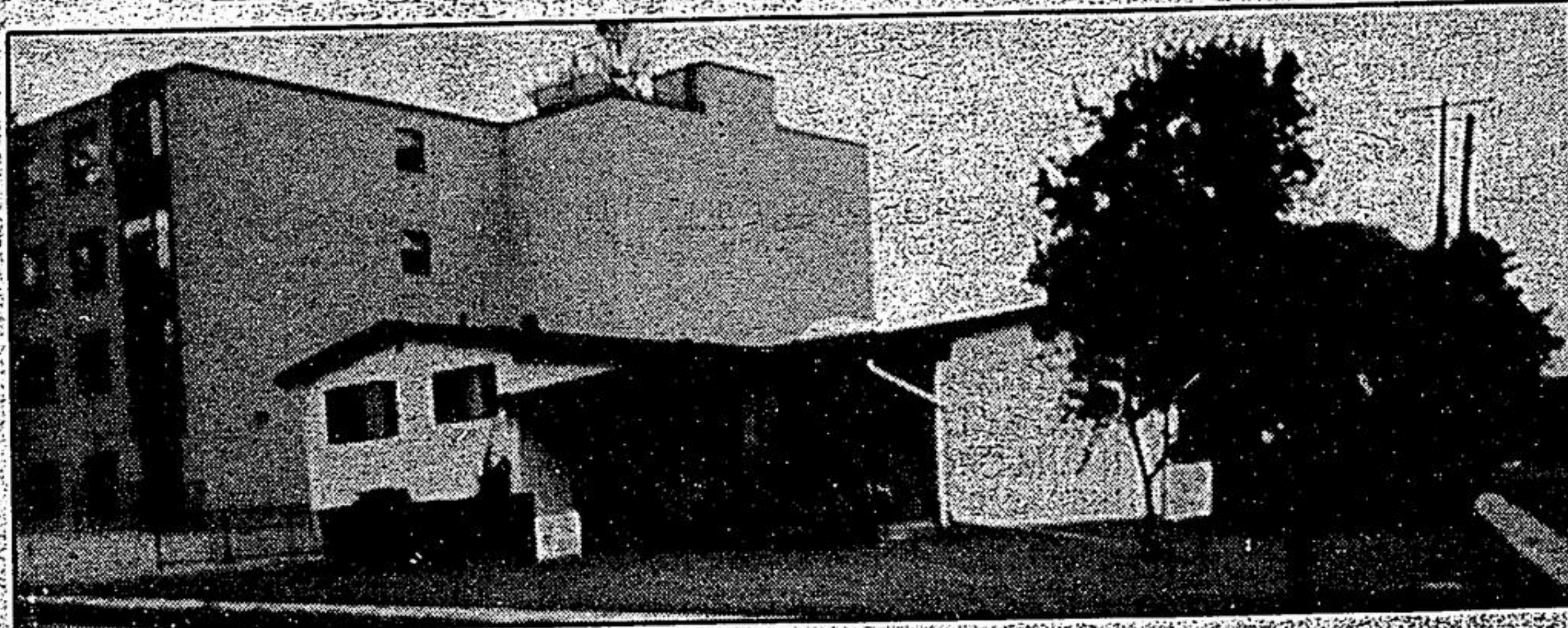
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