

Blizzards, Drouths and Pests Harass Pioneers

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It was Mark Twain who made the wisecrack about everybody talking about the weather and nobody doing anything about it. There isn't much you can do about it other than adjust yourself and your affairs to the moods of the elements.

Those Kinkaid homesteaders out in the sandhill districts had a sublime faith and persevering courage worthy a richer reward. A few acres would be brought under cultivation, the crop of beans or corn in early June holding a promise of fruitful harvest.

The winds blew and to save that field from ruin by drifting sand the homesteader went out with a load of hay to scatter in the wind over the field. Maybe in the end his field was a blow-out.

While man can't do a thing to regulate the weather, he has learned to adjust himself to it. Even so, he has met more than his match on occasion. One such was on January 12, 1888. The story of that day could only be told through the medium of countless individual experiences. The tale of a few such experiences will follow.

The Winter of 1887-'88 was one of deep snow and severe cold. The morning of January 12 dawned sunless and grey. Behind the mild, soft temperature of that sunless morning lurked a monster. In midforenoon, human and animal on the go in town, in the county, in the state, in the vast prairielands East of the Rockies, it struck. It struck with a violence so terrible, so overwhelming that for the moment life was struck dumb. Earth and all thereon was enveloped in a cloud of snow so dense that so far as being able to see an object you may as well have your eyes closed. The storm raged throughout the day. In town men braved its fury to look after school children and get them to safety. By midnight the storm abated.

The morning of the 13th dawned on a frozen world. The prairies were strewn with carcasses of dead cattle, a stiff leg sticking out of a snowdrift marking the spot where a critter had fallen.

"Doc Mathews and Clyde King were caught out in the blizzard last Thursday and came near perishing," reported the Tribune of January 19, 1888.

They started from Ed Small's place and were about two miles South of Dry Creek when the storm came up. They battled in desperation to get somewhere and after three hours' exertion, when they were about persuaded that they would have to give up and take their chances on burying up in a snowbank, they ran into a fence and found their way to a cow stable. Here they were discovered by John O'Neill and taken to Billy Ryan's house a few rods distance.

"It was a decidedly close call. Clyde says Doc was so happy when they got into the stable that he threw his arms around the neck of a motherly-looking old cow, kissed her repeatedly, exclaiming: 'I tell ye, old girl, I'm awfully glad to see ye!'

"Doc says Clyde is one of the bravest boys he ever heard of; that he kept ahead of the horse and picked out the road when it was almost death to do it, thus saving their lives.

"During eight years' residence in Holt county, with a proverbial reputation for getting lost, Doc says this was the worst yet and the nearest call he ever received. With his frozen nose, he is decidedly happy."

The harsh Winter of 1948-'49 does not erase from memory's tablet the suffering and losses of the '88 blizzard. More than a score of people lost their lives in Holt county in '88 and it was estimated that the carcasses of one-half of the herds in the county were strewn over the prairie.

Recalling only a few of the tragedies of that awful hour on prairieland, Joseph Bellar, residing seven miles North of O'Neill, was one of the first reported frozen to death. Then came reports of John Keller, of Chambers; Mrs. Chapman and two children of the Faust family were found dead near Stuart; a grandmother kneeling in the attitude of prayer in a sled and the team standing in the shelter of a haystack South of Dustin, the little girl still alive, the grandmother cold in death.

Etta Shattuck, of Inman, was teaching a school somewhere in the vicinity of what is now district 194. The records in the office of the county superintendent do not disclose her name as a teacher of the year or the district in which she taught. She got her pupils safely home through that blizzard but became lost herself and took refuge in a hay stack. Three days later Dan Murphy, then living where Andy Clark now lives, went to that stack for a load of hay and found her. A son of Mr. Murphy, two daughters and other relatives are living in O'Neill and have given The Frontier the story of their father and grandfather finding Miss Shattuck.

She was still living but her legs were so badly frozen that they were amputated and she died three weeks later. Miss Shattuck was one of a number of Nebraska teachers who became recognized throughout the country as heroines in that storm by getting their pupils to safety.

Minnie Freeman, of Valley county, was hailed everywhere as an outstanding heroine. A country school teacher, she tied her pupils together in single file and led the way to safety to the home of a settler. Grace McCoy, of O'Neill, teaching in the country, exercised judgment, born of pioneer life and kept her pupils in safety in the school.

Charley Harding recounts the bitterness of that Winter storm when he froze his feet while out making efforts to save the stock. His parents and the family were living in the Swan lake valley at the time. They lost 365 fat sheep, 40 head of cattle and a pony in the '88 blizzard. Added to these losses the year brought to them the death of his brother, Eli, and the further disaster of the burning of their home.

These are some of the things out of which our fathers and mothers emerged with heads erect and forged again their fortunes on the anvil of individual effort.

The body of one man, D. B. Lukins, who perished in the storm of January, 1888, was found on May 4 of that year by W. B. Lynds near the town of Bartlett in Wheeler county.

To warm up after shivering in the blizzards we'll turn our attention to hot winds. On a rain-soaked day in April, 1894, two or three men discussing the weather and the season's outlook in front of the Ward livery and feed barn. One of them remarked that it would be dry enough before Summer was over. Every day in April brought rain and maybe that sounded like a rash remark. Came May, June, blistering days of July and August and the rain god had closed the windows of heaven. Out of Kansas there came at noon of a day in July a hot blast and for days a scorching wind fanned across prairieland. Corn blades turned yellow, grass took on the somber brown of Autumn, gardens failed, the outlook for the Winter's bread was disheartening.

That Autumn Holt county sank to its lowest level. Hot winds consumed the plantings of the Spring and early Summer, the public treasury had been rifled of all but 13 cents and man and beast faced a starvation Winter. But out of the worst gloom shines the stars. We were more frightened than hurt.

As if to compensate for the destruction of Summer, the Winter was mild. Livestock were turned out to rustle it through and came out in the Spring fat and sassy. Supplies were brought in from abroad for the first time for those who were in need. Some pulled out and left for more fruitful fields. Others remained and in time gathered the abundant fruits of toil and sacrifice.

The Summer of 1936 brought the dust storms. Holt county had no part in this only as it lay in the track of the clouds of dust floating in with the winds from the South out of the denuded wheat lands of Kansas and Colorado. On a mid-afternoon the sky became overcast, the gloom of approaching night gathered around us down there West of Amelia, when a neighbor came hurrying over to ascertain the time, thinking it must be night. That was at 3 o'clock. The gloom deepened. Within a few minutes we were in the darkness of a starless midnight. A dust cloud overhead, a rain cloud above that and sunbeams had been shut out. Then rain fell spitting our verdent prairieland with Kansas and Colorado mud. Grasshoppers and beetles worked with the weather and wrought destruction that Summer, but as the grasshoppers of the '70's, the blizzards of the '80's and the hot winds of the '90's were lived down so we came through the travail of 1936 to continue business at the old stand.

Fresh in most everyone's mind has been the historic, ghastly Winter of 1948-'49. I shall let the "Voice of The Frontier" diary and pictures tell that greatest of all weather stories.

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'VOICE OF THE FRONTIER' TELLS WORLD ABOUT The Recurring Blizzards of 1948-'49

It all began November 18, 1948.

That date marked the beginning of a ghastly Winter that died hard and left in its wake misery and even death for humans, an appalling toll of livestock, and an economic loss of untold thousands of dollars.

O'Neill and Northeastern Holt county, particularly, were in the direct path of that unseasonal November 18 storm that continued through the following day. That late Fall storm, disrupting all communications, was the forerunner of a succession of blizzards more devastating, more severe and more terrible than weather-beaten oldtimers had ever known.

Residue from that storm was destined to linger until late May under layer-upon-layer of ice and snow. Not until mid-April did the weatherman finally relent and were the embattled citizens able to dig out.

Finally, when the populace and vast herds of livestock were faced with actual starvation, the Fifth Army moved in with hundreds of bulldozers. After a series of reversals by subsequent storms, the Army's men and machines got on top the situation and there was rejoicing . . . people were liberated and the sun began to shine.

By sheer coincidence, The Frontier's long-planned installation of a radio studio linked principally with its "parent" station—WJAG at Norfolk—went into operation shortly after that first storm.

During the dark months of January and February, the "Voice of The Frontier" conveyed to the world the grim story of a beleaguered people. These word-picture accounts were widely rebroadcast throughout the Nation. In addition, thousands of words were dispatched daily to press services.

In this condensation of the Radio Diary, reference to road conditions have been eliminated, for all intents and purposes. While road information was of prime importance to local listeners, it was a fact that even the arterials were closed for days at a time. Highway crews had a thankless, endless job of opening and reopening roads 'round-the-clock, week-in-and-week-out.

Excerpts from the Radio Diary during the crucial period in late January and early February follow:

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 26—

WJAG (Norfolk, 9:30 a.m.)

Well . . . the big news this morning over the nation is the fact that portions of Nebraska have been designated by Governor Peterson as an emergency area.

One of the storm centers is O'Neill . . . where civic leaders for several weeks have been pleading with various officials and agencies to officially proclaim the blizzard areas in a state of emergency.

Just exactly what this means and how emergency machinery is going to be put into action we do not know at this time. But the Holt county board of supervisors is meeting again in O'Neill, drafting a hurry-up message to Governor Peterson

and advising the governor as to just what is needed.

The Frontier learned last evening from the Associated Press bureau in Omaha that Governor Peterson for two days has been pressing anyone with almost any authority in Washington for aid to stricken Nebraska regions. Yesterday he talked to President Truman's executive secretary and asked that the president match the half-million dollars that has been okayed by the Nebraska legislature for storm relief.

Andy Clark, chairman of the Holt county board of supervisors, told us a few moments ago that one of the heavy pieces of Air Force equipment, which has been used to clear the Municipal airport air strip, this morning is starting to reopen the opportunity road.

One of the Army's "weasels" reached O'Neill during the night and today is prepared to make emergency trips to the country.

Private snow-plowing equipment is being assembled in O'Neill . . . some of this equipment has already been at work for several days.

Rural people in dire straits and without telephone service are urged to get to a telephone as soon as possible.

This information has just been passed on to us and we're going to repeat: There are a number of pieces of heavy snow-plowing equipment working in the O'Neill region. This equipment—for the most part—belongs to private contractors and the Air Force.

The private equipment will be dispatched on a \$12 per hour basis. Arrangements for use of this equipment can be made by calling 42 or 48 in O'Neill.

About 10 o'clock last night the bodies of Mr. and Mrs.

Clarence Kiltz, prominent Holt county farm couple, had been removed from their farm to Chambers.

Mr. and Mrs. Kiltz perished earlier in the week . . . the exact date is not known . . . but their frozen bodies were discovered yesterday afternoon by Harvey Jones, a neighbor.

Mr. Kiltz died in the barn and his wife's body was found about 12 feet from the house. Authorities have not yet reached the scene to investigate, but there is a supposition that Mr. Kiltz, who has been suffering a heart ailment, was stricken . . . he possibly laid down in the barn to recover . . . and there he died.

Some neighbors believe that Mrs. Kiltz went out to search when her husband became over-due.

Both Mr. and Mrs. Kiltz were in their 60's. They lived three miles East and five miles North of Chambers.

As news concerning the Kiltz tragedy was reaching O'Neill, funeral arrangements were being made for Marsh Van Dover, age 78, who died a week ago today in the snow. He suffered a heart attack. Funeral services for Mr. Van Dover, who lived alone, will be held at three o'clock today in the Methodist church here. Burial will be in Prospect Hill cemetery when the road to the cemetery is open.

Holt county American Red Cross officials have just received a wire from Glen B. Custer, field representative from the St. Louis regional office, stating that he definitely would arrive today in O'Neill.

The Municipal airport at O'Neill is now open. For three days heavy air force snow removal equipment from the U. S. Air Force base at Kearney, has been fighting snow and ice to clear the one and one-half mile road to the airport and airstrip. Late last night the airstrip was completed and the port can now accommodate heavy aircraft.

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 28—

WJAG (Norfolk), 4:30 p.m.

Your announcer is Bill Beha.

Here is the latest word on developments in aid to distressed persons in this area.

The Holt county board of supervisors has been in continuous session since morning gathering reports of those in need and making arrangements for the opening of country roads. Delays have been encountered in getting equipment to this area due to road conditions and communication difficulties.

Efforts are being made now to obtain heavy equipment from private contractors in Omaha who are assembling equipment there from various points for use in the distress areas.

Large tractors and bulldozers are being sought, four are on their way to O'Neill and 20 more have been requested.

In connection with applying for use of the bulldozers that are being brought into Holt county for emergency use, the equipment is being supplied with fuel and manned at a total cost of \$12 per hour. So ranchers and farmers appealing to this privately-owned

(Continued on page 4-H.)



FINDS FROZEN TEACHER . . .

Dan Murphy, O'Neill homesteader, found Etta Shattuck half-frozen in a haystack 72 hours after the historic blizzard of January 12, 1888. Miss Shattuck, a school teacher, died several days later. (Story at left.)



OL' DOBBIN TO AID . . . Ol' Dobbin came into his own once more during the Recurring Blizzards. Country folk with a number of horses were fortunate ones. Sometimes, however, snow was so deep that even horses couldn't negotiate it. Photo taken following November 18-19 storm shows horses drawing automobiles out from a downtown drift.—The Frontier Photo by John H. McCarville.

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- Women's Rayon Slack Suits, two tone, now \$5
- Women's Dress Slacks, reduced to 4.50
- Girls' Dress Slacks, reduced to 1.50
- Women's Dress Shoes, now \$1, \$2, \$3, \$4
- Women's Full Fashioned Nylon Hose, now 67c
- 31x99 Sheets 1.79
- Cottage Curtains Reduced to 1.25
- Famous Rondo Percales, reduced to 39c
- Fast Color Prints, reduced to 31c
- Men's Sport Shirts, long sleeves, now \$2, \$2.98
- Men's Sport Shirts, short sleeve, now 1.75
- Men's Dress Shirts, reduced to 1.66
- Men's Cotton Briefs, elastic top, now 39c
- Boys' Casual Coats, reduced to \$5, \$7

Congratulations!

Penney's Extend Heartiest Congratulations to the Community of O'Neill in this DIAMOND JUBILEE YEAR