

# WEEKEND IN A WEASEL

THIS EPIC STORY written by Editor Cal Stewart first appeared in The Frontier, O'Neill, Neb., weekly newspaper, on February 17, 1949, and was broadcast by the author over Radio Station WJAG, Norfolk, Neb. It is a first-hand report

of a weasel mission during the Recurring Blizzards of 1948-49 and presents graphically the work of the Fifth Army and American Red Cross in Operation Snowbound. Copies of the February 17th issue of The Frontier were exhausted and reprints were made to meet the demand for extra copies.

I took a two-day whirl through snowland by weasel and airplane to find out how a dozen snow-locked Nebraska families in one of the hardest hit disaster areas were enduring the worst Winter in the history of the West.

I got an idea of how the Fifth Army and American Red Cross came with men and machines to relieve human suffering and livestock starvation, and how, together with a strong-willed people, man, as usual, was winning the struggle with nature.

Our story begins on November 18. This portion of North-Central Nebraska—northeastern Holt county in particular—was visited by an unprecedented late Fall blizzard that raged for two days. Since then about 67 inches of snow has fallen in blizzard-after-blizzard. For weeks the story has been the same: wind and snow, snow and wind. Men who've spent their life here have lost count of the storms. Men who have been idled for years for their survival of the Great Blizzard of 1888 and whose memories of that storm have made lowed slightly during the intervening years, now witness that the Recurring Blizzards of 1948-49 have brought about the hardest and costliest Winter on record.

Layers of snow and ice measured 35 inches in depth on the level.

The Fifth Army moved in during the first week of February with appreciable strength, and Operation Snowbound was begun. Until then, Holt and 21 other Nebraska counties had been in a state of emergency for a week—officially proclaimed by the governor. Thousands of families had not been heard from for weeks. Food and fuel supplies had long since been depleted and in numerous instances, exhausted. Livestock on short rations for many weeks were weakening and dying. Many families used fence posts, furniture and an occasional brooder house for fuel.

Meanwhile, hundreds of caterpillar tractors with bulldozer attachments were rushed out of army engineer storage depots and off government reclamation projects to join the battle. Civilian bulldozer operators and maintenance men, were speeded to the disaster area to man these machines. Weasels—a species of vehicle that is a weird cross between an oversized jeep and a light tank—were flown in from Camp Carson, Colo., where the Army trains mountain and ski troops. That's when Operation Snowbound got underway.

I contend that Major General A. Pick's label for this great peacetime mechanized operation is a misnomer. It should read: Combined Operation Snowbound. I say combined because this arctic battle could not have been fought so successfully thus far without full cooperation between the populace, the Army and the American Red Cross. Before forces were joined for the all-out assault, these dogged, weary people were taking everything the Weather Man could dish out.

I'll admit, though, there was a time before the Army arrived that the spirit of these people had hit a new low. There was a time when even the hardest wondered how long they could hold out.

But let's get on with the trip. Our weasel departure was scheduled from the American Red Cross distress headquarters in O'Neill, capital of Holt county's 2,400 square miles, at 2 p. m. on Saturday. The mission was to transport fuel oil and medicine to distressed persons, to take grease to a waiting bulldozer along the way, to drop off at his home a farmer who had been marooned in town for sev-

eral days, and to deliver to the Army supply point two "refreshed" dozer operators—cat skimmers, they call them. This motley crew consisted of: T/Sgt. Walter Fairfield, of 355 East Broadway, Muskegon, Mich., and T/Sgt. Grady Boutwell, of 14½ West McKellar St., Memphis, Tenn.; Earl Kifer, 56, O'Neill farmer; William S. Buck, jr., of O'Neill, and Francis Moore, of Atkinson, civilian bulldozer operators, and this reporter.

Destination was the Gibson school—a country classroom transformed into an Army-Red Cross supply center, a billet for fatigued dozer and weasel crewmen, a message and refuge center for storm-stranded residents. Gibson school is 24 miles northeast of O'Neill, about the same distance from a hardsurfaced highway or a railroad.

The umpteenth snow-and-blow of the Winter had been forecast for 24 hours and was sweeping in from the icy northwest. Between gusts of gale-like wind sometimes one could see up to a hundred yards ahead of the weasel. Long-range vision wasn't of prime importance, anyway. The big job was the close range proposition of watching what remained of fence lines. Between these fence lines, presumably, lay a road under a blanket of snow.

Northeastern Holt county is sparsely settled, flat, and table-like. It is utterly defenseless against the icy winds that sweep across it from the north and west.

All we could see was an ocean of glacier-like ice and snow. Everlasting snow. Not all fence lines were visible. The three- and four-foot fence posts, normally important in restraining livestock in this beef-producing country, were not even useful for guidelines. Cattle and weasels alike went over them. We saw tufts of brush on top of the snow. Actually these were tops of small trees.

Our first stop was at the Walter Young farm, 12 miles northwest. Mr. Young is a lean, middle-aged six-footer who inherited the place from his father, a homesteader with seven sons. The Youngs hadn't asked for help. They had a telephone and had the satisfaction of knowing they could summon help if needed. Actually, we stopped there because our weasel's electrical system was acting up and it was a handy, large farm house.

Day of the November 18th storm Mr. Young went by team and wagon 10 miles north where he was pasturing 85 head of cattle. The sudden cold killed two head. Mr. Young brought the cattle and three of the children home together that day. The children had been marooned in their country school. From then on Mr. Young's cattle were close in to feed and protection. The children were back in school on only three days since Christmas—the only days the school was in session.

Yes, the Youngs were lucky. But their nearby neighbors were not so fortunate. Marsh Van Dover, 78, died in the snow following a heart attack. Lloyd Whaley broke his arm. Alfred Marsh was kicked by a horse. Another neighbor, a young chap, had to be taken to a hospital. In all four cases airplanes were used for transportation.

The Army's dozers hadn't reached within about two miles, but Mr. Young said he "wasn't worrying." They'll get here as soon as they can," he figured.

Mrs. Young insisted we have eggs, coffee, bread and cookies before we moved on. If we'd allowed time she'd have carried that phase of their hospitality even further. We'd been out several hours and we lingered there long enough to warm up, eat and get acquainted with their five children: Alice, 13; Robert, 10; Marvin, 9; Esther, 3; and

Walter, Jr., 1½. Esther was on the lap of one of the sergeants all through the stay.

Next stop was at the Ora Howard place—a mile and a half and an hour and a half in blinding, swirling snow. With the mercury in the neighborhood of eight degrees below zero, we churned on. The north-west wind hit almost broadside, finding plenty of openings in the weasel's flimsy side curtains. These curtains were mildly reminiscent of the early days of automobiles.

The Howards live in a modest three-room house. Their eldest of five children is a daughter, who has been snowbound in O'Neill, where she attends high school, since the day after Christmas. Their youngest, awakened by the 8:30 p. m. commotion, is five-months-old and had seen O'Neill once.

Twice the Howards, who live on the Opportunity county highway, had run short of food and telephoned in their orders from a neighbor's place. Twice a mercy messenger responded—flying a light ski-equipped craft. The Opportunity road, an important county road, had been opened twice—once for 12 hours during January. This was good. Most other roads had not been open since November 18.

Six and a half cold miles remaining. We resumed with our two-ton war-born weasel.

Thing about this snow is that it is sugar-fine and packs solid. Whenever men and machines go over snow instead of through it you can bet your fur-lined jacket that it's not ordinary snow.

Whenever dozers open and reopen a road several times, throwing up chunks of snow almost as big as the weasel itself, there arises a tricky, time-consuming problem in crossing the big ditch. There were miles of white-walled highway—now only half full of snow because of this new storm. Still the weasel was better off worming over the snow a yard above the cornfields and meadows, darting around trees, telephone poles, haystacks and windmills then see-sawing over the new, hard drifts on the road. But negotiating the sea of snow in the fields was rough enough—like tackling the ocean with a small rowboat. In many fields there was evidence that last year's corn crop was yet to be picked.

Sergeant Boutwell, an easy-going Memphis guy with a characteristic drawl, dryly observed: "When this snow has melted, the water eventually will reach the ol' hometown on the Mississippi."

"Might just as well head these dozers down that way when we get this cleaned up," he continued. "These big fellows can throw up some levees in a hurry. I want to go to Memphis this Summer, anyway."

Finally, at 11:20 p. m.—nine hours and 20 minutes after our departure—we rattled up to the Gibson school, which was nestled near the largest grove of trees we'd encountered. A gas lantern was in the window and a coal burning space heater had the place warm.

Students' desks had been pushed aside. Army canvas cots and GI blankets had been moved in. Aroma from the coffee pot atop the heating stove filled the room. On the blackboard were chalked schematics of the locality—an ideal blackboard for briefing drivers.

Two civilians, both volunteer workers who had lived for years in the neighborhood, were in charge—Albert Sipes and Robert Tomlinson, both robust, middle-aged men wearing bright plaid checked shirts.

Off-duty drivers—civilians and GI—were sleeping, most of them with their clothes on. Dozers had been operating round the clock, weather permitting, but with the filling-in that accompanied Saturday night's wind and cold and about a half-inch of fresh snow, all dozers had been pulled in to "sweat out" the storm.

There were two telephones in the room—one a faint link with the outside world, and the other an intra-community proposition. Both were crude installations—for the emergency only. Distress headquarters in O'Neill had advised of our impending arrival, but Sipes, Tomlinson & Co. had practically given us up, thinking enroute we had stowed away for the night with some congenial family.

But preparations had been made. There was room enough for the late arrivals because others had been dispersed to nearby farm homes.

The sleeping drivers slept on and in about three-quarters of an hour quiet reigned over the Gibson school room, except for the wind and a forlorn coyote.

The school teacher and her seven little pupils wouldn't have recognized their school room that night. Neither could they have found their arithmetic books.

Morning dawned clear, bright and cold—five degrees below zero. But the wind had subsided, and in the sun one could see the conglomeration of things that Operation Snowbound had brought to Gibson school. There were three caterpillars, big and small; three weasels; one fuel truck; several improvised sleds; one coal

truck; 17 bales of hay; 12 blocks of salt; sacks of mail, oil, grease, and a marooned automobile. During the course of the day several airplanes were there, too.

In the sun one could see the rakish flavor of clothing used to break the sharp wind. The Camp Carson soldiers were considered well-dressed for this sort of thing. As for the civilians, innumerable items of war surplus and just "surplus" togs showed up. The scene was a cross between a lumber-jack camp and a World War II bomber base in England with a navy item or two thrown in.

Here's how the American Red Cross worked in the tiny communities served by the Gibson school. Orders were phoned to the distress headquarters in O'Neill or to one of the two phones at the school itself. Airmen flying over the desert of snow often saw distress signals, would set down on the snow and investigate. Supplies are either flown back out, as is the case with foodstuffs and medicine. If bulkier commodities were needed, they were transported by caterpillar-drawn sled or by weasel with supplies dropped off along the way.

Sleds were hurriedly built with rough lumber. They resembled a mortar box. They hauled up to 10 tons of supplies. Typical cargo for both weasels and sleds consisted of coal, fuel oil, bottled gas, baled hay, oil, cotton cake, and blocked salt.

Al Sipes, 35, is a clean-cut fellow with a knack for projecting himself into the middle of interesting circles, usually winding up in a key spot. He was reared out here, went to high school in Detroit, Michigan, where he played in the backfield on the football team. Father of three daughters and one son, he is one of O'Neill's handymen.

Smilin' Al is five feet six inches, weighs 170 pounds, has blue eyes and light hair, looks every inch a specimen of health and as youthful as a college griddler.

Through his Winter's activity, Al Sipes has carried a grudge against a railroad company. Several months ago while he was driving his truck across a main line track on the outskirts of O'Neill, a freight train closed in on his machine, which had stalled astride the tracks. Mrs. Sipes first saw the oncoming train. They got out of their machine and Al raced up the track, gesticulating with a red bandana. Train stopped—after smashing to smithereens the rear of Sipes' truck. The wreckage was strewn along the right-of-way for about a month while Sipes, the insurance company and the railroad wrangled.

When Sipes got ready to move the truck he said he was assured by the depot agent that no train was coming. This time the wreckage was astride the track, being towed in a slow process, when, sure enough, a freight train came lumbering around the bend.

Again Sipes took off up the track. This time he succeeded in stopping the locomotive short of adding insult to injury.

The engineer and Sipes exchanged glances. They had met under similar circumstances a month before!

This feud with the railroad doesn't belong here except that on Sipes' only visit to O'Neill during his tour of duty at the Gibson school he ran into plumbing troubles at home that made him mad. A double-header snow plow had gotten stuck in a snowbank a short distance from Sipes' house, and the vibration set up by the twin iron horses in breaking through the snow had shaken the kitchen sink off the wall.

Sipes had a few weasel errands to make Sunday morning, invited company. The weasel driver, Pfc. Guy Davidson, of Beatrice, and I went along.

First trip included dropping off "refreshed" dozer operators several miles away and delivering three sacks of mail to the Star postoffice.

Star postoffice serves 40 patrons and is a back entry room on a handsome, big farm house that is perched on a hill and is sheltered by a neat grove. Charles V. Cole is a busy man—father, farmer, stockman and postmaster. His wife was postmaster until she got sick and died more than a year ago. There are four children.

A tiny stream normally flows through the Cole farm. It could not be seen. At the point nearest the house the stream was 30 feet below the surface. Snow had levelled off a small gully. Mr. Cole for several years has had a small dam, a tiny lake and a spillway there. He doubts if the dam will stand the test in the Spring when the thaw comes.

The Cole's feedlot was full of cattle, but the stock would have starved except for a neighbor, who had a big tractor, and made a timely visit to "uncover" some haystacks.

They ran out of corn for their pigs the days they were able to replenish their supply after an army dozer had cleared the road to the place.

Subsequent storms refilled the road and this day there wasn't a vehicle within miles except for weasels, caterpillars and aircraft.



The Gibson school . . . located 24 miles northeast of O'Neill . . . transformed during disaster into American Red Cross supply center, billet for fatigued dozer and weasel crewmen, a message and refuge center. —The Frontier Photos by John H. McCarville.



Inside the school students' desks were pushed aside to make room for GI cots, blocked salt and fuel oil. The teacher and her seven little pupils couldn't have recognized the school this day. In the photo (left-to-right) are: M. L. Parks, of O'Neill; Robert Tomlinson, of Star, and Francis Moore, of Atkinson. Bob Tomlinson is dispatcher at Gibson school; Parks and Moore are civilian "cat skimmers" (or dozer operators).

Twice during the Winter first-class mail had been dropped at Star from low-flying aircraft. As we left, Mr. Cole and two of his children at home prepared for a several days' job of sorting mail.

Enforced imprisonment was conducive to letterwriting. Going by the Elmer Juracek farm a young lady met us with a handful of letters to be mailed in town.

Back to the Gibson school once more we hugged the fire a few minutes and had a cup of coffee before reloading and setting out again. Sergeant Boutwell was engrossed in a grammar geography titled, "Nebraska Old and New." I peered over his shoulder to see what he was reading. The Tennessee was finding interesting the stories of the Easter Storm of 1873 and the Great Blizzard of 1888—two events in state history which, no doubt, will be supplanted in importance by this new disaster when the historians have had time to bring the school books up-to-date.

Sergeant Fairfield was looking through a stereopticon—and making a discourse on German camera lenses. Fairfield had been with occupation troops in Germany until recently.

In the corner a game of monopoly was in progress with men sitting at children's desks. Sipes had visited most families in the area once or was satisfied they had been contacted, but at Ray Siders' place we dropped mail; at the home of the Alders—Goldie, Ray and Dave—we left groceries and mail. We also left mail at Guy Johnsons, where a brand new automobile stood firmly on unmistakable dirt—the only dirt seen in months.

The Johnsons were wise to a twist in the wind currents. While the shrubbery, farm implements and an outbuilding barely peeked out of the snow, the shiny new car rested proudly in the yard, waiting to be driven at least 18 inches before plowing into a mountain-like snowbank.

We made a number of other stops. One was at the Otto Ruzickas in the Dorsey neighborhood. He and Mrs. Ruzicka met us at the door. Mr. Ruzicka is the community "veterinarian." He's been a mighty busy man in recent weeks, had made a number of "professional" trips by airplane and "By George, likes flying." We delivered block salt to the Ruzickas. They'd been getting along okay in every respect and their eldest boys had been helping some of the neighbors.

No leaving the Ruzicka place without something to eat. No sir. Sort of inconsistent, delivering precious foodstuffs at many places along the way and here—near the end of the journey—a well nourished city fellow sitting down and eating some of it. Obviously, the Ruzickas had fared better than many of other others. Airplanes had been in to pick up the "doctor" and bring in supplies. Mrs. Ruzicka winked when she told of the enormous order of foodstuffs they had "laid-in" just ahead of the first big storm.

When John Derickson and his wife, in their 50s, first saw Sipes wrestling a burlap sack of coal from the weasel to their front door, Mr. Derickson wept. Speechless, he put his arms around Sipes. He wanted to express gratitude and couldn't.

The couple, living in a small but comfortable home which they own together with a quarter section of farm land, had run out of fuel and was trying to keep warm by burning green cottonwood in the kitchen range. One could see where Mr. Derickson's saw had been at work, but the wood was too green to give any heat.

The Dericksons, living on the edge of the Dorsey settlement, 30 miles northeast of O'Neill, had not been to town since last October.

Their only son, Lester, a World War II veteran, who spent considerable time in the China-Burma-India theater, was near Atkinson, 50 miles away. He was there keeping things going for Mrs. Les Payne, his mother's sister, whose husband had died a short time ago.

Right now the parents needed him. Since the war everything in the Derickson household revolved around Lester. Now he could not be reached even by telephone. There were 20 head of cattle, the haystacks were all snowed in, the fences were somewhere under the snow—useless. Mr. Derickson wanted to reimburse the American Red Cross. Sipes said, "No, Pop, that's out of my department. I'll be back with more stuff. Don't worry."

Here an airplane came to pick me up. Pilot had succeeded in following our weasel tracks. There was to be steam heat, lots of food, fairly clean streets in O'Neill where I was going. Nothing to keep me out on this desert of snow; out where many of the men were wearing long hair and grizzly beards; out where people were haggard and weary; and out where an occasional carcass was mute evidence of a critter's struggle

against nature and the feast of a coyote.

Flying back to town over that expanse of alabaster white, I could see dozers at work on strategic roads and an occasional haystack which was being "uncovered." Each dozer or team of dozers had its own entourage, consisting of a "grease monkey," fuel truck, and a bobbed or some crude conveyance on which the farmer or rancher had made his way to help guide the dozer around weak bridges or to a vital stack. There must be no lost motion or lost time in a battle like this—where people have been fighting for weeks for their lives and their very existence.

One thing was certain: This northeastern Holt situation was only a small but yet an important part of the storm-stricken area in the western part of the United States. At least four persons are known to have died in the O'Neill region—four out of the 500 lives claimed in the storm in the West. Nebraska's economy has been badly shaken and the price of beef steak the country over very likely will be affected. No one can say how many head of livestock have been lost or are yet to be lost.

But I can say that the battle has been won with cooperation, neighborliness and generosity. People whose basic philosophy is benevolence and goodness don't buckle when going is toughest. They rise to new heights and win.

As long as there are men and women alive who remember the Recurring Blizzards of 1948-49, this epic chapter of American history—Combined Operation Snowbound—will be told. They helped win the fight against the worst Winter on record.

## 100 PERCENT

During this Weekend in a Weasel, The Frontier editor contacted 15 farm families. He discovered: in EVERY home the regularly-scheduled "Voice of The Frontier" programs were heard religiously; in two-thirds of the homes he found The Frontier a regular visitor (until the storms came.) School classes were held at the Ben Miller farm home, instead of the snow-bound school. Classes usually began for Teacher Lola Ickes and her three pupils at 9:30 a. m., except on Mondays and Wednesdays, when studies started at 9:45—following the "Voice of The Frontier" program. One family charged the radio battery regularly in an automobile in order that they could hear the "Voice" over Radio Station WJAG.



Al Sipes, 35, . . . O'Neill handy-man-turned-weasel-driver