

HURRICANE WINDS, SNOW HIT

Man, 23, Freezes to Death in Storm Region Is Paralyzed By 100-Mile-Per-Hour Gale — Worst in History

ABANDONS CAR, TRIES TO WALK

Robert Gesiriech's Frozen Body Found Along Roadside

A 23-year-old Atkinson man, Robert L. Gesiriech, perished late Tuesday or early Wednesday while groping his way on foot during the worst snow blizzard in Holt county history. This was the only fatality attributed to the storm in the O'Neill region; one of three in Nebraska.

Young Gesiriech's body was found lying along the side of highway 20-275 about 8 o'clock Wednesday morning by a state highway department snowplow crew, which turned around and reported the discovery to authorities.

Vernon Eppembach, one of the plowmen, said Gesiriech's body was lying on ground blown free of snow. It was badly frozen. Eppembach's companion on the plow was Charles Porter.

Biglin Bros. brought the body into O'Neill and the identification was not immediately established because of the frozen condition.

County Coroner William W. Griffin, who investigated, said the man's face was badly scratched, suggesting that Gesiriech had encountered barbed wire fences after he abandoned his automobile and was attempting to walk to town. Body was found at a point about a mile east of O'Neill's city limits, near the Lloyd Gibson place. Later, the abandoned car was found in a ditch near the Elkhorn river bridge about a mile further east.

Acquaintances reported seeing Gesiriech in Norfolk late Tuesday afternoon.

If this were true, he succeeded in getting within about 2 miles of O'Neill before he was forced to abandon the car.

The body was found near an intersection and the Gibson house is situated only 700 feet away. Visibility was so low Gesiriech would have been unable to see the house. Apparently his hat or cap had blown off and his head was covered only by a handkerchief. He was without overshoes.

Funeral services will be held Saturday at Atkinson. Rev. W. C. Birmingham will officiate in rites at the Methodist church and burial will be in Wood Lawn cemetery.

Robert Leroy Gesiriech was born on May 2, 1925, at Stuart, a son of Mr. and Mrs. Florian Gesiriech. As a small child he moved with his parents to Newport.

At the age of 3½ he fell into a plate glass window at Newport and, except for a doctor's immediate attention, his parents say he would have lost his life from blood loss.

His arm was almost severed between the elbow and shoulder and innumerable stitches were required to close the wound.

It was the injury that kept him out of military service early in the war, but later he served a year in the ground forces medical corps, being separated at Ft. Warren, Wyo., on April 20, 1947.

For a time he worked on a ranch south of Long Pine for Charley Peterson. Meanwhile, he had been working as a mechanic.

Survivors include: Widow, the former Darlene Steskal; parents—Mr. and Mrs. Florian Gesiriech, of Atkinson; sisters—Mrs. Lloyd Thurlow, of Stuart; Mrs. Edward Bausch, of Atkinson; Mrs. Claude Callen, of Los Angeles, Calif.; Mrs. Norton Thurlow, of Atkinson; brothers—Edward G. Gesiriech, of Lincoln (temporarily working at Culbertson); Florian Gesiriech, jr., of Los Angeles; Eugene G. Gesiriech, of Atkinson.

TV Towers At O'Neill, Stuart Absorb Beating

The storm hit TV, too! At Stuart, Joe Langan reported the top of his TV antennae toppled to the ground, and the top of a 200-foot tower in O'Neill, belonging to W. B. Gillespie, also was damaged.



A row of parked automobiles is buried under the drift. Car in foreground gives idea of depth. Note how snow is plastered against buildings. Powder-fine, it was packed by a 100-mile-per-hour gale.—The Frontier Photo by John H. McCarville.

Expectant Mother Marooned 10 Hours

Mrs. Wallace O'Connell, Son 'Doing Fine' After Rescue

By a Staff Writer

Probably one of the most dramatic rescues ever to evolve from the pages of a storm log was performed Tuesday evening while a raging, howling snowstorm lashed the O'Neill area.

It is the story of an expectant mother, a farm wife, who was marooned in the blizzard for 10 hours. She huddled in an open horse-drawn grain wagon, helpless, as her husband abandoned the scene to find aid. There she lay wrapped in blankets while the 60- to 100-mile-per-hour wind shrieked over her head and while snow piled deep around the wagon and in the box.

The story began about 11 o'clock Tuesday morning. The stork was due so Wallace O'Connell, well-known O'Neill farmer and auctioneer, loaded his wife, Stelli, into the wagon. He pointed the horses toward O'Neill and the party—the man, his wife and a hovering stork—set out in the blinding storm.

About 1½ miles from their farm home the wagon bogged down and was unable to go further. This was at a point 2 city blocks west of the O'Neill Country club, still a cold, long 1½ miles from the hospital.

Unable to get the team started again, O'Connell made sure his wife was tucked in with the blankets and he headed off for help. This was about 1:30 p.m.

At 3 o'clock Tuesday afternoon, in spite of the blinding blizzard and reduced visibility, O'Connell arrived at the Carl Asimus home in West O'Neill and told his story and the position of the wagon. O'Connell was virtually exhausted.

Combined efforts during the ensuing 2 hours were futile. State and county snowplows and graders were unable to reach the marooned woman. A weasel and a caterpillar lost their way and were hung up on obstacles. Finally, around 5 p.m., a group

of 8 men organized at the Lohaus Motor Co., in O'Neill, and set out for the scene on foot. The leader of the group, Lloyd Godel, said the men traveled single file, but once or twice were separated facing the driving wind and snow.

The 8 men arrived on the scene to find Mrs. O'Connell wet from the snow and cold. They hustled her by wagon to the O'Neil Country club. There, after spending an hour building a fire and getting warm, the rescue crew was met by another 9-man patrol. They transferred Mrs. O'Connell to a zipper stretcher with clean, dry blankets. Then the two rescue squads set off for the hospital. The men led the horses and the wagon carried Mrs. O'Connell.

Finally, some 200 yards north of the state highway department garage, the team of horses gave out. The men carried the litter bearing the expectant mother from this point to the highway garage, on the outskirts of O'Neill. Here they stopped for another warmup before the final push to the hospital.

Shortly before 9 p.m., a little over 10 hours after her harrowing experience began, the expectant mother was admitted to the hospital. In spite of the hours of exposure in the arctic winds, hospital attendants who examined her, posted a bulletin that her condition was "good." Mrs. O'Connell corroborated the statement; in fact, she insisted she was "fine—although somewhat cold."

O'Neill residents, hearing of the farm wife's plight, prayed. Perhaps never before has the community—though sullen and snow-locked—been moved by the drama that was unfolding with winter at its worst.

The stork alighted about 1 o'clock Wednesday morning—about 4 hours after Mrs. O'Connell's admission to the hospital. Timothy Joseph O'Connell weighed 7¼ pounds.

When the word was passed the next morning that the mother and babe were "doing nicely," hundreds of hearts beat easier.

Mrs. O'Connell had this to say about her experience: "I really didn't get discouraged while waiting for rescuers. My feet got pretty cold but I was

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Mrs. O'Connell and Timothy Joseph O'Connell . . . both "doing fine." Babe arrived 3 hours after Mrs. O'Connell was rescued. She was marooned 10 hours in an open horse-drawn wagon (below), carried by litter to O'Neill hospital.—The Frontier Photos by John H. McCarville.



By a Staff Writer

March 7, 1950, will live in history. That was the date of the most violent snow and wind storm in the history of the O'Neill region. It is a date that will be remembered and talked about as long as there are people alive who remember the dreadful ordeal that began early in the morning, subsided the next morning, left one man dead, many people and livestock suffering from exposure, and buried the countryside under mountainous drifts of powdery, sugar-fine snow.

With savage fury the storm struck O'Neill in the early hours Tuesday morning. Radios had forewarned a storm and lower temperatures, but there was no advance notice of 18 inches of snow that was to be borne by gales ranging from 60- to 100-miles-per-hour throughout the entire day and into the night.

When residents awakened Tuesday morning, hurricane-like, arctic winds were sweeping out of the north and west with unprecedented fury. The light snow was driven into every crevice, every opening, and few homes or business buildings withstood the assault without admitting snow and cold.

Temperatures hovered between 12-degrees and 5-degrees throughout most of the day and night. Most observers said it was a blessing temperatures didn't drop lower because loss of human life and livestock would have been catastrophic.

One sturdy pioneer, who weathered the great blizzard of 1888 and who witnessed the recurring blizzards of 1948-49, predicted that deaths caused by the blizzard would have been commonplace except for modern transportation, radio warnings, buildings and trees.

Storm Is a Killer—

Tuesday's storm was a killer—it packed a lethal wallop that would have killed any living thing that it caught without ample protection. Because the recurring blizzards of a year ago were fresh in the minds of many, most people exercised extreme caution and took no chances.

Visibility was limited to about 20 feet by 10 o'clock Tuesday morning and by noon visibility was nil. Gusts of wind carrying the swirling snow prevented pedestrians from seeing more than several feet ahead. The handful of people that were making urgent errands in downtown O'Neill groped their way along the sides of the buildings. Frail people would have been unable to negotiate the wind, much less plow the snow and pick their way.

Farmers and ranchers, familiar as they are with their barnyards and feedlots, never before have experienced such difficulty in caring for their stock. In many places people moved in two's and three's to look after each other, and they clung to ropes to keep their parties intact.

Ainsworth's government weather station reported steady winds of 65-miles-per-hour with gusts up to more than 100-miles-per-hour. Later in the day, as the storm moved south and east, the government weather bureau at the Norfolk airport registered similar readings. Omaha, still later in the day, reported a gale of 82-miles-per-hour.

O'Neill lay in the direct path of this historic storm from both a standpoint of wind punishment and snow. Eighteen inches of snow were officially recorded by Government Observer Elmer Bowen. Snowfall diminished west of Ainsworth and Norfolk received only 3 inches.

Weather forecast for Tuesday, announced the night before, tersely stated that temperatures would be colder and there would be some snow in the east portion of Nebraska. Thus, the element of surprise was all wrapped up in this storm.

Monday was a balmy, springlike day—much as the day before the great blizzard of January 12, 1888. Young ladies who worked in stores, shops and offices were bedecked in dainty spring frocks, youngsters played marbles in the streets, and Lenten worshippers went to church leaving their furs and winter wraps behind.

Dust Clouds Form—

Toward evening dark clouds began to gather in the sky. Some observers said they resembled dust clouds that formed in the 1930's. By 8:30 Monday evening the skies were dripping with rain. There was even some thunder. Rain and thunder are practically unheard of during the first week of March. Then the mercury began to slip. By midnight temperatures were freezing and by 2 a.m. the cold front had struck.

The belting that the O'Neill region took during the ensuing 18 to 20 hours belongs in bold print in the history books.

Early Tuesday all streets and highways were snow-clogged with giant drifts that grew overnight. During the recurring blizzards last year the drifting was cumulative. But in this storm in a few hours, with one vast stroke, the region was paralyzed.

John D. Osenbaugh, O'Neill resident engineer for the state highway department, promptly announced that snow removal equipment wouldn't consider venturing out until the storm had subsided.

The westbound Chicago & Northwestern mainline passenger mail train, enroute from Omaha to Chadron, encountered the high winds about 5 a.m. at Clearwater, and reached O'Neill 20 minutes late. That was to be the last transportation in or out of O'Neill until hours after the storm had passed. The train later felt its way to Long Pine where it was held up. Meanwhile, the Burlington held its eastbound train number 96 in the O'Neill station.

Few schools even attempted to hold classes. Many communities were without electricity and telephone. Communications were severed and many hours were to elapse at some of the points before service could be restored.

Throughout Tuesday residents had no choice but to sit at home and follow the progress of the storm by radio. The announcers sometimes had trouble being heard above the roar of the raging winds. Many O'Neill business firms were never opened.

Not a wheel turned within a good many miles of O'Neill Tuesday, Tuesday night and early Wednesday morning.

Livestock were pounded mercilessly. Their coats were drenched during Monday evening's rain. When the rain turned to ice many of them became blinded. First snow was soggy and wet and when the freezing set in many cattle were smothered.

By late Wednesday hundreds of head of cattle were still unaccounted for. Snowplow crews and rail crews clearing the right-

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