

Blizzards bring funny stories too

By Kathy Sjulín

As night temperatures dipped below freezing this week, many residents across the state may have grumbled as they dashed back into the house to hunt up that down jacket before going to work.

Others, however, probably held their tongues as they remembered worst storms and lower temperatures in the not-so-distant past.

The worst blizzards in Nebraska's history occurred in January 1888 and January 1949, according to the records of the UNL climatology office in Nebraska Hall.

Ester Culwell, who has worked in the climatology department for 17 years, said, "If anyone has been in a Nebraska blizzard, he knows it's nothing to fool with."

Most of the snow accompanying a blizzard is in the form of the powdery particles which are whipped in such great quantities that visibility is only a few yards, she said.

The blizzard of Jan. 12, 1888, covered one-third of the United States and produced some of the lowest temperatures on record in this state, Culwell said. Valentine reported a record 36 degrees below zero.

THE BLIZZARD arrived without warning because in those days there were few daily newspapers, no radio broadcasts and no rural telephones, Culwell said.

"The only methods of communication were telegraph and word-of-mouth, and because of this lack of communication a blizzard was more than an ordinary storm to pioneers," Culwell said.

W.H. O'Gara, author of the book *In All its Fury*, which is a chronicle of the 1888 storm, said, "When it descended without warning, a blizzard often brought with it fear, sorrow, loss, cold and hunger."

Culwell said O'Gara's book contains the memories of many individuals who lived through the blizzard and met annually to do research and reminisce about the blizzard until 1967.

"This group was called the 1888 Blizzard Club and met every year on Jan. 12, the anniversary of the storm," she said.

The 1888 blizzard has often been called the "school children's storm," Culwell said, because it caught hundreds of teachers and pupils in the little schoolhouses scattered throughout the prairies.

Sod and log dwellings and schoolhouses which were common in 1888 were ineffective against the extreme cold of this blizzard, she said.

"Many stories have been told of teachers who tied ropes around their own waists and then around the waists of the children to lead them to safety," Culwell explained.

The temperature records reveal the severity of the storm, according to Culwell. For example, at 6 a.m. in Scottsbluff on Jan. 12 the temperature was 30 degrees. The temperature plunged to 6 below zero by 2 p.m. and by 9 p.m. it was 14 below zero.

"What I can't believe," Culwell exclaimed, "is that for the next two nights the temperature remained at 35 below zero."

There is no official record of the number of individuals who died in the blizzard, Culwell said.

"However, some unofficial totals reached as high as 170 and as many as 28 people who managed to live through the storm died before spring because of indirect effects of the storm," she said.

IN SPITE OF THE sorrow caused by the 1888 blizzard, many humorous stories have been passed down about it, Culwell said. One of these involves a snowbound girl left alone with a small baby during the storm.

According to the story there was no food in the house where the girl was trapped with the hungry, crying baby.

"The story says the girl found some whiskey in a cupboard and gave the baby a liberal snort along with some water. Apparently, the concoction worked wonderfully well, the girl reported later, except that the baby went to sleep with his eyes open," Culwell said.

The 1949 blizzard also arrived with little forewarning,

Culwell said. However, communication was more advanced and the state quickly organized "Operation Snowbound" to cope with the storm.

Culwell said she remembers that "Operation Snowbound" consisted of more than 500 volunteers who worked around the clock aiding people who had been injured or were trapped without food.

"Operation Snowbound succeeded in freeing 79,454 snowbound persons and was chiefly responsible for saving the lives of many starving cattle who were fed when bales of hay were dropped in pastures from planes," she said.

More than \$5 million was spent for snow removal alone in this operation with damage to highways exceeding \$2.5 million, Culwell said.

Culwell said more than 20 lives were lost because of 41 inches of snow which formed record-breaking drifts.

Even so, Culwell said, Nebraskans found a light side to the 1949 blizzard just as they had 61 years earlier.

"I REMEMBER HOW amused everyone was by the school kids near Gordon who had the bad luck to be marooned with their teacher for nearly a month with not a single day of class missed," Culwell said.

In Columbus, the townspeople put on a home-produc-

ed entertainment show on succeeding nights for almost 300 stranded passengers on two trains, she said.

Culwell said some people prospered from the storm and cited the headline "Grocery Business Good" which appeared during the first week of February in 1949. According to the newspaper, "Grocers did land office business in Pierce as farmers were averaging \$75 grocery bills as safeguards against a future storm."

Culwell said she believes the more people know about the weather, the better they can live with it.

There are several things one should do if trapped in a blizzard, according to Culwell:

- Avoid overexertion and exposure.
- Stay in your vehicle. Don't attempt to walk out of a blizzard.
- Don't panic.
- Keep fresh air in your car; wet snow can seal out oxygen.
- Beware of the gentle killers like carbon monoxide.
- Exercise. Don't stay in one position very long.
- Turn on the dome light at night to make the vehicle visible.
- Keep watch. Don't permit all occupants of the car to sleep at once.

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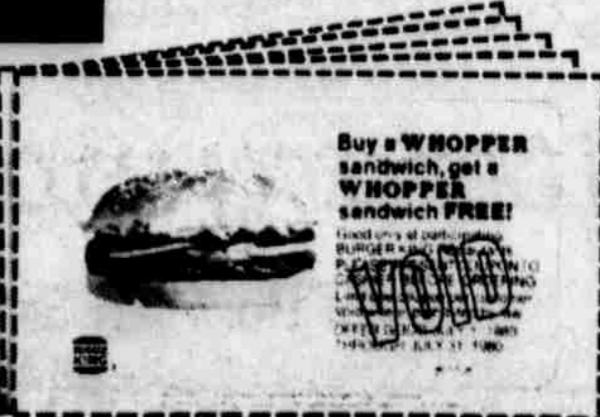
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