

Curator's Corner . . .

By CLAUDE R. COOK

A famous Iowa tradition was broken this past winter—there was no “January Thaw.” I do not know how many times there has not been a “January Thaw”, but since boyhood I recall that it has been an axiom that it would occur. Well, in 1949, it did not.

This, and the past severe winter, reminded me of some earlier winter experiences. When a boy, my brother and I owned a pony, a cross between a Hambletonian and a Shetland. We drove him to a two-wheeled cart, popular in those days. One winter, ignoring all parental warnings, we started to drive him to town to Sunday school through the snow. Just above our house a drift was deeper than he was tall. The result, a floundered pony, a broken cart shaft and two very depressed spirits. This says nothing of our father, who was in not too good spirits. His personal comfort was to be found in “I told you so!”

That same winter, we had to open that road, but there was no glamor about it then. No rotary snow plows—in fact, no snow plows for highways—tho they were called roads then. So, the neighbors formed a shovel band. I was included in that philanthropic enterprise and we opened three miles so town could be reached. A team of mules hitched to a bobsled would follow us, and when they could wallow thru, we knew we had accomplished our purpose.

Then one day the 1:00 p. m. train on the Burlington, Creston, St. Joe branch left our town of Kent for Creston, eleven miles northeast. An old-fashioned blizzard was in progress. Aboard was a small boy with a dislocated shoulder, going to a Creston doctor. The train stalled in a cut two miles north of Kent and did not reach Creston until the next day. Passengers from the train were taken to a nearby farm house in a bobsled. Crossing a ravine enroute, the sled upset—which was one of the better things a bobsled could do—and the

little boy's shoulder was snapped back into place. I was there at the train the next morning and saw my first snowplow. It was attached to the front of a three-locomotive hookup, and it plowed into that snowdrift, hurling snow clear over into fields on either side of the railroad track. Sometime that day, the train was "pulled" into Creston.

The winter of 1911 and '12 marked another chapter in my futile efforts with a snowdrift and an even greater demonstration of poor reasoning. The young lady, who since 1912 has lived under the handicap of being my wife, and I planned a "cutter-sleigh" trip from Creston to Kent on a Sunday. I hired the livery team and sleigh. We had plenty of advice that we could never make it, but like so many "who know so many things they have not learned," we started. We did not get outside of the corporation until we were hopelessly settled in a snowdrift higher than the horses. The tongue was twisted out of the sleigh, the young lady's nose was frozen and that trip ended in a nearby home where we telephoned for help. I remember it cost me \$5.00 just to get into that snowdrift and out. But in those days, \$5.00 was a lot of money. It was not an insulting piece of money, it represented affluence.

Another winter episode and snow experience transpired in Audubon county. In May of 1920 the Gray consolidated school district was voted, carrying by about twenty votes. I was the secretary of the association of interested citizens who brought about the success of the project. Then, as now, two ballot boxes were required if the town in the proposed district had a population of 200 or more. A few of us, three to be exact, discovered about six weeks before election that Gray, the town in question, had less than 200 people when all were at home. And—this is one for Ripley—we kept that a secret until the day of election. Many who thought there should be two ballot boxes voted, went to the county attorney in Audubon, then reluctantly home. Two law firms—one very famous in Iowa—each took a private

census of the town in an effort to invalidate the election, with no success and that fall the consolidated school began operating.

It was that winter that makes this story pertinent here. One of the school bus routes went past some houses of people unfamiliar with the advantages to be gained by the consolidation and who were unconvinced of its practicability. Accordingly, removing snow from the bus route was not among the things they could enthuse most about. So we formed a group of men from Gray and shoveled around the route where necessary.

A few years later, I was called back to dedicate the fine new school building and I could find no one who was not proud of it. In fact, some former opponents had built houses within the new district to avail themselves of the facilities provided by the new school.

An even earlier snow experience came in 1915. It involved my first performance of the marriage ceremony after entering the ministry and occurred in Fremont county, northwest of Tabor. Snow was excessive that week and the Tabor Northern train did not run for several days. Again my wife and I hired a livery "cutter" to drive to the farm home where the wedding was to be held. Following the snow bank, literally inside, outside, and over the wire fences, we tipped over and were both rolled out. A steady team and nothing broken enabled us to proceed and we arrived in time for the wedding with no further mishap. A severe gastronomical attack, caused by tainted oysters served at the wedding, made us feel the next day preference for an upset sleigh.

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