

The Winter of 1935-36

By OTTO W. KNAUTH

The research for a recent newspaper story led the writer to prepare the following historically useful article especially for the ANNALS OF IOWA. Mr. Knauth is assistant city editor of the *Des Moines Register*. Born in Germany, he was educated in Europe and New York, and later studied at the University of Illinois.

Iowa winters are long and often severe. The last one was no exception. Snow covered the ground over much of the state for more than two months, from January into March, and temperatures remained below freezing for one period of thirty days.

But the snow and cold cannot be compared with the winter of 1935-36, which stands as the worst in living memory. Some of the more elderly folk of that year recalled winters of pioneer days, and concluded that none exceeded the records set during the winter of 1935-36. In at least one respect—sustained cold—that winter was the worst in the 117 years that state-wide weather records have been kept in Iowa.

Beginning January 18, the temperature in northwest Iowa remained continuously below zero for the next 35 days. Over the state as a whole, it fell below zero an average of 15 days during this period and stayed below zero for an average of three days. The state's average temperature for the entire winter was 12.6 degrees, only one winter, 1874-75, being colder, with an average of 11.8 degrees.

Snowfall for the winter of 1935-36 reached an all-time record of 42.9 inches for the state of Iowa. Snow fell almost continuously during the latter half of January and on through February; high winds piled it into such drifts that the weather bureau estimated more than half of Iowa's 215,000 farms were isolated for seven weeks.

January was marked by blizzards on the 16th, 17th, 18th, 22nd and 30th. And fierce storms occurred on the 3rd, 8th, 9th and 26th of February. Three of these blizzards were of disaster proportions—those of January 16-18, February 8-9 and February 26, the last mostly affecting northwest Iowa.

The great storm of February 8-9 undoubtedly ranks as one of the worst ever to hit Iowa. It uniformly covered the entire state and literally brought daily life to a standstill. Nothing moved on the highways or railroads for the next two days, and it was at least a week before transportation returned to any semblance of normalcy.

Men and animals suffered severely. Direct costs of the storm in terms of business lost and snow removal, as well as property damage, must have run into the millions of dollars.

The winter started rather innocuously; the weather was not particularly bad in December, and the first part of January was even comparatively mild. Then a cold wave and blizzard struck on January 16 and temperatures dropped below zero over much of the state. Snow that fell on this date remained on the ground in some places for 72 days—a figure equalled in Des Moines in 1959-60. The cold hung on and deepened. On January 22, 1936, the temperature fell to 33 degrees below in the northern counties, and to 22 below in southern Iowa. An average of twenty inches of snow fell in the southern part of the state the night of January 17-18, with 3 inches in the north.

Snowfall averaged 19.4 inches for the month of January, three times normal. The average temperature in Iowa for the month was 9.5 degrees above zero, 9 degrees colder than normal. The average temperature at Lake Park in January was 2 degrees above zero. The coldest reading recorded was 33 below at Elkader January 24.

With the thermometer standing at 29 below, a school bus became stuck in a drift near Clarion. It was pulled free and managed to get its passengers to school. A young Cedar Rapids girl, Lillian Schminky, walked three miles to school. Both her legs were frozen below the knees when she arrived. A milk shortage developed in the Davenport area as blocked roads prevented farmers from making milk deliveries. There were hundreds of cases

of frostbite. Sixty pupils at Northwood suffered frozen ears, noses, fingers or toes.

Coal mines were unable to keep up with the growing demand for fuel as the below-zero cold hung on and snow drifts made delivery difficult. The lack of fuel grew so acute by the end of January that Governor Clyde Herring declared an emergency and appealed to the miners to dig overtime. With union miners on a 35-hour work week, the appeal was forwarded to union headquarters in Washington, D.C., where it was agreed the miners would work on Saturdays in order that persons on relief could be supplied with coal. The first such Saturday was February 1, and it was estimated that between 20,000 and 25,000 tons of coal were mined—all for the indigent.

But even this was not enough and the coal crisis continued with reports of isolated persons burning corn and even furniture to keep warm. At Vinton, police patrolman Jack Bingaman, wearied of repeated thefts of coal, warned that henceforth he would "let the doctor find out" who the thieves were.

Sportsmen's clubs became concerned about the quail and pheasant populations, and endeavored to spread grain. A plane was used to aid birds in the Fort Dodge area. Some people also put out sand and gravel when it was found the birds were finding grain but needed grit for digestion.

And still the bitter cold gripped Iowa. At Sac City, Dr. F. C. Jackson and a county snowplow crew fought drifts for six hours to reach the home of Norman Elam, a critically ill farmer who lived eleven miles from town and had been isolated for two weeks. He was found to be suffering from mumps and pneumonia when the doctor arrived late on the night of February 4th. The next day the snow had piled up to 27½ inches at Glenwood, averaging 25 inches over much of southwest Iowa, 20-25 inches in the north-central, 15-20 inches in the central and 10-15 inches in the east and northwest parts of the state.

The snow and cold claimed the lives of 22 persons by February 6, with the worst yet to come. The worst blizzard of the winter howled out of the northwest on Saturday morning, February 8, practically paralyzing the state. Winds of 30-40 miles an hour blew the new snow into drifts 20 feet high, and the temperature plunged again. It lasted all day and through the night. Highway snowplow crews battled the storm for a time; then the wind closed the drifts in behind the plows and they gave up. Many machines were abandoned where they stood.

The railroads kept up the fight a little longer, then they too were forced to give in to the storm. Some drifts rose higher than the telephone poles along the roads by Sunday morning. The Des Moines weather observer warned that when the snow ceased, "we are due for low temperatures they'll be talking about in generations to come." It didn't get quite as cold as predicted, but the storm is still remembered a generation hence.

Farmers struggled to save their livestock. Many animals died and others came through the winter with stunted growth. Use of the roads became impossible. Under these conditions the horse came back into its own as a reliable means of transportation. Many farm families got out for food and supplies by driving a bobsled across the fields, cutting fences or simply riding over them, following the meandering ridge lines as the pioneers had before them.

Mails were delayed a week or more. Wildlife, even skunks, were found standing frozen to death in the open. With the coal shortage growing more critical by the hour, the governor asked cities and towns to open public buildings to families who had run out of fuel. In Des Moines, the Polk County courthouse was kept open for this purpose over the weekend, as well as four schools. The Des Moines fire chief warned luckier residents against overheating their furnaces and risking the destruction of their home by fire.

Many still recall the "Saga of No. 22," a Rock Island passenger train bound from Minneapolis to Des Moines. It bucked through ever-mounting drifts until finally stopped about three miles south of McCallsburg in northeast Story County. The conductor, Jack Hassler, walked back to McCallsburg through the blinding storm. There he found a coal train using two locomotives. Both went to the aid of the passenger train and pushed it into McCallsburg. The passengers huddled in the coaches or the McCallsburg station for the next 72 hours. Twice the station house caught fire from the overheated stove.

Crews of men filled tubs with snow for the steam locomotive so it could keep heat in the cars. The train's lighting system gave out and passengers retired to their berths by candlelight. Food supplies began running low. One report at the time said the ante in an all-day poker game with a ten-cent limit, had been raised to a dollar by evening, and also stated that several passengers retired very early that night.

Two rescue engines, including one of the largest in the country, started from Des Moines. Pushing a plow ahead of them, they made their way north through drifts which were sometimes higher than the locomotives. The stranded train was reached by Sunday morning and the ordeal was over.

The Union Pacific's new diesel streamliner, City of Portland, also became stuck in the storm, suffering the ignominy of being pulled from Clinton to Chicago by a steam locomotive. A livestock train was halted near Clarion, and several of its carloads of hogs froze to death before help could reach them. Streetcars in Des Moines were derailed by the huge drifts and service stopped. Frost collected in illuminating gas pipes, cutting off gas for cooking to hundreds of homes in the city. Thousands of cases of frozen water pipes were reported, and the municipal waterworks was kept busy repairing frozen meters.

Frost was reported 7 feet below the surface of the ground at Charles City, 4½ feet down at Dubuque, 5-6

feet in the Floyd River valley near Sioux City and 4 feet down in Des Moines. The ice was 42 inches thick on the Iowa River at Iowa Falls. It was 25 inches thick on the Missouri River at Council Bluffs, the most ever recorded there. And the Mississippi River froze to a depth of 23 inches at Dubuque.

The milk shortage grew acute again, and families were told to save what was available for babies. Officials in many towns took over distribution of remaining coal supplies. The bins of all persons applying for relief coal were inspected to make sure they were empty. Some towns completely exhausted their fuel supplies and had to borrow from neighboring towns. Des Moines' mayor, Dwight N. Lewis, announced the Des Moines Electric Company and municipal waterworks would make their coal stocks available to the public. The huge piles of coal were found to be frozen solid and had to be blasted loose.

Highways in the state remained hopelessly blocked all day Sunday; but the winds abated a little on Monday and a few of the main roads were opened. Steady progress was made in restoring transportation facilities across the state from then on, although the temperature did not climb above freezing in Des Moines until February 22.

The snowfall for February averaged 15.9 inches for the state, the most in the 45 years state-wide records have been kept. Algona and Forest City reported totals of 35½ inches. The lowest temperature reported during the month was 35 below at Sibley.

The grip of the 1935-36 winter on Iowa was finally broken on March 2, and long sought for signs of spring appeared.

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