

THE PALIMPSEST

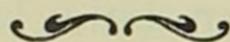
EDITED BY JOHN ELY BRIGGS

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Winter Peril

The weather is like news — only the unusual is noticed. Early settlers, being generally exposed to the extremes of heat and cold, fair weather and foul, remembered most vividly the bad storms and abnormal seasons. For instance, Ambrose C. Fulton never forgot a blizzard that caught him on the prairie in 1843. His adventure, as reported by David N. Richardson in the Davenport Democrat fifty years later, is here reprinted from Fulton's autobiography entitled A Life's Voyage, pp. 388-392.
— The Editor.

The weather in pioneer times was not all good. There were some phenomenal spurts of fine weather, as, for example, the winter of 1853-54, when farmers plowed all through December, and some of them through January, and when the grass was to be found green and fit for grazing all the season through, but there were some other winters that were rougher, the old settlers think, than any we of these days have to show.

The winter of 1842-43 was something awful.

On November 16th the river closed at Davenport, crushing two or three steamboats that had taken refuge at this point, and sinking one of them on the Rock Island shore. Two days later A. C. Fulton crossed on the ice, and the bridge that carried him over then held fast to its abutments till late in the spring, and between the closing and the breaking up of the river was included some of the most grievous winter weather that this part of the country ever saw.

One experience of that winter still makes Mr. Fulton shiver and want a heavier coat whenever he thinks of it. He can bring on a chill in mid-summer by reviving its memories.

On this memorable occasion he was driving across the unmarked prairies of interior Iowa in a cutter, drawn by a team of horses. He was out in the neighborhood of Independence, and had gone there to look up practicable water powers, with the idea of building a mill somewhere in that neighborhood, for the local manufacture of the wheat that was then so plentifully grown by the few farmers who had opened farms in that region. He was on his way home, on Sunday, February 26, 1843, following an unmarked course toward his next stopping point, for there were no roads out there then.

A snowstorm came on. The term blizzard had

not then been given to such phenomena, but this was a blizzard of undoubted authority and genuineness. The snow came whirling down as it can do in such a storm, hurried along by Arctic blasts that were enough to pierce the thickest overcoat and overcome the stoutest heart. In a little while the horizon line was lost. Earth could not be told from sky. Direction was undistinguishable. The instinct of the horses was as much baffled as the skill of their driver. They were lost on the prairie.

Mr. Fulton says he was clad then about as he is now for fine fall weather, which is to say that while he was clothed for comfort in Indian summer he was in fine trim for an early death by freezing in such a storm. He had a buffalo robe, and it was about all the protection he had that was worth naming. It was useless to stand still. There was no refuge within many miles, and it was hardly to be hoped that man or team could live to reach it; but the horses plodded on, while the storm held on and the snow whirled past them.

The day passed into the night, and still they made their way ahead, the direction of the wind being their only guide. They could be sure that it was from the northwest, and they held it to their backs and made tracks as fast as they could toward the comforts of civilization. Morning

came and still the storm held. All through Monday, the horses, unfed and unwatered and un-rested, held their way. The man in the sleigh was so stiffened in his buffalo robe wrappings that he could not have cared for them if he had found a place to alight. Monday night came on, and with it no sign of shelter. Monday night passed and Tuesday morning dawned, and still the cold was intense, and there was no trace of human habitation or possible place of refuge. Tuesday dragged its slow length along, but by this time, tiresome and torturing as they were, the hours did not move slower than the worn-out horses. They had almost reached the limit of their endurance and strength, but they moved forward at a pace compared with which the gait of the average funeral train would have seemed a welcome burst of speed. It could barely be called motion.

It was with feelings of the deepest despair that Mr. Fulton saw the light begin to fade on Tuesday afternoon. The situation was as hopeless then as it had been before, save for the fact that the homes of settlers were a good many miles nearer, but with his fagged team a mile might mean death. Rescue could not be much longer delayed if it was to be worth accepting. In a short time the end would surely come. Cold and

hunger were doing their work. The frozen fingers and the well-nigh frozen arms could no longer guide the tottering steps of the poor half-dead animals, and they moved, what little they did move, without a master's hand. And in this hopeless, pitiful condition the miserable party of two horses and their master were, as night again settled over the white prairies, so black with the abandonment of hope that it was no longer worth while to think of living.

If the reader can bring himself to imagine this case fully and completely, he may be able to understand what a tumult of emotions were aroused in Mr. Fulton's breast when he caught — for a faint, flickering instant — the dimmest kind of a gleam of light through the blackness which rimmed the horizon. It was just a glint that was speedily extinguished, and it was too faint and far away to found hope upon; but it shone again, and clearer. That light meant warmth and food and life, with all that life means; but it was so far away, so dim and distant, and the half-dead team was so near its last strained effort that it also meant the saddest of all deaths — death within sight of escape and safety.

The horses were turned toward that star of hope, and they dragged, dragged themselves forward, so slowly and painfully that they seemed to

stand still. The hours had been long with monotonous despair before, but now they were long with the agony of fear that the way of escape would be barred at the last steps of the retreat. But the horses were still alive, though barely so, and barely able to move, and they did make progress, though it was so slow and distressful. Little by little the light grew plainer. What if it should go out? It had been hours since dark fell, and the settlers were all men of steady habits, who went early to bed. What could keep this particular light burning, and how soon might it disappear and leave the wanderer in darkness to miss the window from which it shone?

But it burned on, and after a while it was near enough to show the window panes from which its faint rays were filtered through the rime of frost, and in time the perishing party drew up at the door of Farmer McLoughlin's humble settler's shanty. A shout called him out, and the storm was robbed of its prey.

Mr. Fulton was unable to walk. His feet and legs, and his hands and arms, and face and ears, were frozen. He was carried into the house. Both feet were planted in one bucket of ice-cold snow water, and both arms in another, while wet applications of pulped raw onions were laid upon his face and ears. The frost was drawn with

these homely remedies, and amputations and perhaps death was averted. The poor horses escaped death by freezing, but though all possible care was given them, out of gratitude for their heroic effort, they died in a little while, and as long as they lived had bare existence. They never had the spirit of horses after that three-days' pull, from Sunday morning till Tuesday night at midnight.

It was a rare chance that placed that candle beacon in Farmer McLoughlin's window. He had killed a beef animal that Tuesday, and that evening he was seized by an unusual fit of industry, and resolved, without any special reason for the resolve except a mere whim, to cut up the carcass and salt down the meat before he quit work that night. The rest of the family retired, but he worked on. The candle stood on the table in front of the window, and it reached out over the prairie far enough to catch the frosty eyes of the man in the cutter and guide him home.

During that cold snap, one of the severest of the winter, the mercury in this city, quite a distance southward of the place where this wandering occurred, registered between 25° and 28° below zero. It was a wonder that there were eyes left to see that candle's light.

DAVID N. RICHARDSON