

## The Winter of Eighty-One

Imagine winter coming on the fifteenth of October without any warning — coming to stay too, and ushered in by a blizzard that lasted two days. Northwestern Iowa has seen much severe weather, but for snow fall and unrelenting cold the winter of 1880-1881 has had few rivals. A pioneer of O'Brien County, Thomas Barry, relates the following story of that memorable winter.

On October 15, 1880, the morning after we finished threshing, my wife and I struck off for Sheldon, twelve miles away, to get some flour at the mill and to do our winter trading. The air was frosty, the sun hidden, and the sky looked like a big, gray dome settling down over the prairie. From the near-by cornfields we could hear the thump, thump of the ears against the throw-boards of the huskers' wagons. There being no native timber, we were denied the reds and the golds of woodland October: the brown prairie stretched away in every direction as far as the eye could see. Out in the stubble the prairie chickens called, tumble weeds went hurrying on ahead of us, and rabbits bounded away from the road as we passed. Young cottonwoods, set around the farm yards for windbreaks, had lost their tender leaves, so that the straw-thatched barns and unpainted houses peeped between the naked branches.

"Lots of birds flying to-day," my wife remarked, as we jogged along, planning our day's program. The heavens were filled with wild ducks and geese flying swiftly southward.

To make haste we shopped separately, and so were not together when the snow began to fall at two o'clock. The air was so warm that we thought the storm was only a squall, and completed our preparations to return home about five. In the meantime the wind had risen. The snow that had already fallen was picked up and driven through the air with such terrific force that our horses refused to face the gale. Thinking of the children at home we urged them on, but they would not budge. Not until then did we fully realize that a blizzard was upon us, and that we would be forced to remain in town until it was over.

I could hear the wind moan around the rude hotel all night. The windows rattled in their loose frames so that we could not sleep. "God will care for our children," murmured my wife, while my thoughts strayed also to our unprotected stock, for as yet no one was prepared for winter.

The blizzard raged fiercely that night and all the next day, but the second morning dawned calm and clear. Equipped with a large scoopshovel, we began our homeward trip. After leaving the streets of Sheldon, which were somewhat protected by buildings, we hit what we thought ought to be the county line. Our horses, rested and headed toward home,

were anxious enough to get on, but the low, heavy wagon was clumsy in the deep snow.

Before we had gone very far the horses floundered and the wagon stuck in a big drift. For a little while I sat there, overcome by the scene surrounding us. Our friendly, brown landscape of two days ago was transformed into a still, cold, sparkling, white pall that stretched to the horizon in every direction. Cornfields were entirely submerged, straw piles had lost their identity and become mere mounds of snow, while the struggling, man-made groves only served to catch the drifting snow. I had often seen the prairie covered with snow but the feeling of awe and reverence for that spectacle, as I sat there not knowing the fate of all dearest to me, held me spellbound. My wife felt so too, I think, for instead of urging me to begin shoveling out of the drift, she said, "My, how much I'd give for the folks back East to see this sight."

As we plowed and shoveled our way on, while the sun rose high and then began to descend, our fear for those at home became more haunting. Fortunately, the blizzard was not followed by the usual intense cold, but nevertheless our fingers were numb with cold and our backs ached from the shoveling. Our team became more and more exhausted with the heavy pulling and lack of food.

Finally, as the sun was sending its last red darts over the white prairie, we came in sight of our place. We knew it was our home not by any familiar ob-

ject, but by its position from the road. Nothing was to be seen but the tops of our tallest trees. Everything was as still as death, lying under that heavy blanket of snow. In the middle of the yard there was a drift as high as the house. It was the work of only a few minutes to round that drift and reach the door. Inside we found the children all safe, but crying bitterly because they were sure we must be dead.

Our oldest boy, a lad of eleven, had kept the little sisters comfortable. When the blizzard began he had cut the tethers of the cattle that were tied in an open shed, and let them forage with the rest. Under a mound of snow, from which arose a tiny line of steam, we found all our pigs — about forty in number. Only two were dead. Chickens and turkeys went under straw stacks and stayed in holes rooted out by the hogs.

The day after we got home I walked to a German neighbor's house a mile away to inquire about my calves. He had seen nothing of mine but had lost two cows. "Don't valk no more, Tom; dey go dead," he said. Another neighbor who came to my house to borrow flour had seen my calves going with the storm, and I finally found them all safe, near a row of young willows, their backs humped up and their heads stuck in the snow.

Nearly all my stock was saved, but I had no feed. What corn we had husked before the blizzard I stored in the loft of my dwelling for seed. My boy and I gathered a little in sacks for the cattle, but the

snow kept piling up so high that at last we had to abandon the fields. Then I fed oats. It snowed about twice a week all winter.

A mover who was going from O'Brien County into Sioux stopped to feed himself and team. He had husked most of his corn, and had no stock. Since the snow had become so deep, it was difficult for his horses to pull big loads, so in order to make better time he stored some of his corn in my empty crib.

As the winter wore on, my oats ran out. Only my seed corn remained and it would not go far. The pigs squealed with hunger. "Save that seed corn," said my wife, "feed them the corn from the crib and when the owner comes back give him the pigs, but don't let them starve." I went then and fed another man's corn to my hogs.

During that terrible snow-bound winter we had no wood or coal for fuel. But the prairie slew came to our rescue. Early in the fall we had stacked some slew grass in the yard, and this, twisted tightly, served for fuel the entire winter. It required a good deal of time and energy to twist enough prairie hay to keep us warm, even for a day. Children soon learned the art and worked faithfully at the irksome task. It was a common sight to see piles of twisted grass near the doors of prairie homes.

My children, usually healthy, took sick in mid-winter with a high fever. When our home remedies failed I walked seven miles to Hospers with butter and eggs to exchange for medicine—we had no

money. I struck off in the morning through the snow. Spurred on by anxiety for the children, I was utterly exhausted when I reached the store. The storekeeper — who was druggist too — allowed me four cents a dozen for the eggs and four cents a pound for the butter. He tried to jolly me, saying that I must be out of tobacco to walk so far, but I told him the symptoms of the sick children, secured some medicine, and started for home just as it was beginning to snow.

For an hour I trudged along. Thicker and thicker came the blinding snow. I could not see. The tall grass which stuck up through the snow was my only guide. The dog that was with me seemed bewildered, following so closely he impeded my progress. I became numb with cold as the flying snow sifted into my clothes. After a time I gave up trying to find landmarks and depended upon the mercy of God to lead me to some shelter. I kept walking and finally, toward morning, struck a grove which fortunately proved to be my own. I threw myself down to rest and became so stiff I was scarcely able to move for three days. The children were a little better, but my wife, who had exhausted her strength caring for them and keeping the house warm during my absence, became ill. Since no one was able to bring in the slew grass, we were forced to carry down our seed corn and burn it.

Those of us whose cattle were spared supplied our less fortunate neighbors with milk. The milk,

frozen solid even in the house, was thawed enough to remove it from the container, then it was wrapped in cloth or paper and sent where it was needed.

Roads were blocked almost all the time. Just as soon as a path was broken, fresh snow and wind would wipe out the trail. Many a morning I was forced to shovel my way out of my dwelling. The only time a person ventured from home was for an occasional trip, usually on foot, to the nearest town or to a neighbor's to borrow or to lend. My wife — whose father was a railroad surgeon in Massachusetts — was very proficient in aiding the sick and she was often called upon to lend a hand in caring for needy neighbors.

There was only one social function in the county that winter so far as I know. Mrs. Bert McMillan, near Sheldon, had a rag bee. Three bob sled loads attended the party, making a long detour to follow a broken trail. About two o'clock it began snowing; the party immediately broke up; and the three bobs, keeping in a line, set out for home. They got lost and about ten o'clock came to Whitmore's place, where they spent the night. It was fully a week before some of the party reached home.

Toward evening, on fair days, I often rounded the big drift in my yard and reached a clearing to the south; then, facing the east, I would gaze over the soft, white prairie to where the gray sky closed down on our deserted world and wonder what was going on back East. I thought of the anxiety of our

kin, the companionship of old friends, and tried to imagine what was occupying the minds of politicians and legislators while we fought for mere existence. How quiet that prairie was: only a slight clicking from the frozen twigs of the cottonwoods broke the stillness. The wind seemed to be resting, regenerating its forces, waiting only for the stimulus of fresh snow, when it would again rage mercilessly and, after lashing us to shelter, would howl and moan while it pelted the snow against our dwellings and forced it in through every crevice.

We marked off each day on our calendar and, like everything else, that winter came to an end. Spring sunshine and spring duties met a hearty welcome. We crept out from our shelter like the badgers on the prairie, shook off our winter coma, greeted distant neighbors, and were thankful we survived.

When the snow melted our roofs went in with the weight. The corn which had been left in the fields had become soft and sour: neither cattle nor chickens would eat it. When my mover returned for his corn I told him what had been done with it and offered him the pigs. He smiled and said: "I don't want any of your hogs, but lend me your breaking plow and I'll call it square."

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