

The Blizzard of 1888

While Shenandoah residents were quieting down, nature was feeling restless. It was time to stir up something. What was stirred up was the famous blizzard of 1888.

January 12 dawned warm and sunny, almost like a midsummer day. Men worked in shirt sleeves and threw open doors and windows. In midafternoon a few people chanced to look out across the winterbare acres west of town. They saw the storm approaching, coming without warning. Men stood spellbound as a dark wall rushed toward them. It looked like the side of a mountain.

In an instant all vision was obliterated. The air was filled with needle-like icy particles. The residents slammed doors and windows shut and donned their heaviest cloaks. The temperature dropped from midsummer levels to zero in a few hours.

A minute after the storm struck, it was impossible to see across the street. People who were caught downtown or visiting neighbors felt their way home along the wooden sidewalks, hanging onto fences to guide them. Those who had wood or coal in sheds close to their homes found their way by means of ropes connecting buildings.

Country people were in grave difficulty. With no fences to guide them, they became lost trying to find their way to barns. Livestock in pastures without access to adequate shelter were frozen in the intense cold.

Many rural school children froze to death trying to find their way home. Wise teachers kept their pupils in the school houses. But trouble waited them there. Fuel was lacking to keep the schools warm throughout the night. Teachers dared not attempt to find the sheds where wood was stored. Huddled together and wearing their wraps, teachers and children gathered around the stoves.

First to be sacrificed were the seats and desks. Bigger boys, at the teacher's request, broke them into pieces and fed them slowly into the fire. When seats and desks were exhausted, books were used to keep a bit of warmth glowing in the hungry stoves. Older girls comforted crying brothers and sisters as they waited the long night through till help finally reached them the next day.

Telegrams filtered into the *Sentinel* office the following day telling of countless lives lost and livestock frozen throughout Iowa, Nebraska, and the Dakotas. Old-time weather students still talk of the blizzard of 1888. They claim that such a storm comes only once in a generation. Iowa had a very heavy snowstorm on February

26, 1912, which piled drifts shoulder high in front of Charley Marvin's office. In 1940 the Armistice Day storm brought death and destruction to the Midwest.

"There'll be another one," Charley Marvin predicted, "but someone else will have to write the story."

Shenandoah had fires as well as blizzards. Night fire alarms brought terror. There were no street lights, and pedestrians going home on dark nights sometimes fell off the walks. Marvin usually carried a lantern, which was often blown out by the wind. There were no waterworks, and everyone depended on wells for drinking water. In case of fire the volunteer firemen grabbed their pants and rushed to their stations. They depended on water from wells and cisterns. The old Black-snake engine had to be warmed up and taken to the nearest well. Three puffs of the suction pump often exhausted the water, and the fire burned on.

Take the night the Lafayette Hotel burned! Shenandoah had electric light and power by this time, but no waterworks or sewers, no paving, and no cement sidewalks. It was a wild night in March 1892, and a stiff northeast wind fanned hungry flames across the business district.

The fire started in a shack at the rear of the hotel. A passerby discovered it, and quickly loud yells of "Fire, Fire" awakened hotel guests and nearby residents came running. At first no one

thought of ringing the fire alarm bell. A woman carrying a baby noticed the omission. She laid the baby on the sidewalk and began ringing the alarm bell.

Volunteer fire fighters, who were aided by a large percentage of the male population, rushed to the scene. Clanging bells, barking dogs, whistles, and shouts of frightened men fighting to save the town filled the air. The hotel was almost completely occupied, and shrieks of terrified tenants added to the turmoil.

The only water available came from wells that were worked with hand pumps, with a man on each side pumping vigorously. Men formed bucket lines to carry the water to the fire, and volunteers stood on ladders tossing it ineffectually on the blaze. Salt was dumped on buildings and walks nearby to help halt the spread. Salt was thrown in the water, too.

There were no fatalities but a number of narrow escapes. Some hotel residents lost all their possessions. Carl Quimby made a sensational leap for life. He was busy throwing furniture and dishes out of a third-floor window when someone shouted that the roof was falling in. Quimby abandoned the dishes and dived through the window, taking the sash with him. He was only slightly injured.

Marvin slept through the fire. His first knowledge came the next morning when he stumbled

into furniture piled in the street beside the Flatiron Building.

When the paper was published two days later, there was not a word about the fire on the first page. That page was filled with political stories, editorials, and comments. The fire story occupied a modest column on an inside page. Having absorbed all the political news and views, the subscribers could read about the fire that had threatened to destroy the town.

Being a volunteer fireman was hard work. There were no teams to pull the equipment. The men felt sorry for themselves and thought they were unappreciated. Once they resigned in a body, but they were soon back on the job, lured by promises of improved equipment.